

## **Harry Potter and The Secret Enemy**

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# Harry Potter and The Secret Enemy

by [TheSinister\\_Man](#)

## Summary

Harry Potter returns to school after a first year filled with peril, brotherly battles and a changing world. Conflict follows from school to Privet Drive and back to school, where an altogether too mysterious man of fame and fortune is their new Defence teacher - and it only becomes worse when the Petrifications start.

## Notes

I got some comments on the Fanfiction posting of this fic that the First Trelawney Prophecy that ends Year One is vague and that James was an idiot for giving it so much credence. Just to clarify, what you've seen is only the ending of a much longer prophecy. There's more to it that will be revealed later, and it's (IMO) a lot clearer than Sybil's prophecy about October 31, 1981. Cassandra Trelawney really was good at Divination and she wasn't drunk when she made her predictions.  
:smiley:

If you find yourself enjoying this story - and why wouldn't you - you can join other likeminded people on The Prince of Slytherin [Discord Server](#) There are perks to joining, such as a place I often frequent, and early access to the latest upcoming chapters.

# **The Lessons of Summer**

**THE SINISTER MAN**

***proudly presents***

**BOOK TWO IN "THE PRINCE OF SLYTHERIN  
CHRONICLES"**

***HARRY POTTER AND THE SECRET ENEMY***

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**HP&TSE CHAPTER 1: The Lessons of Summer**

***1 July 1992***

Harry Potter stared at the telephone on his work desk with a vague distrust. Although technically "Muggle-raised," his time spent with the Dursleys had left him ill-equipped to deal with many aspects of Muggle existence. In this instance, while he (unlike most Purebloods) knew what a telephone was, he had never actually used one in his entire life, and he was now oddly nervous as a result. However, his nervousness was outweighed by his frustration over the fact that not one of his friends had owled him any letters so far, not even to respond to those he'd sent out. It was ... annoying. Finally, the boy took a deep breath and dialed the number in front of him, and after a few rings, a female voice answered.

"Granger residence."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Granger. My name is Harry Potter, and I'm a school mate of Hermione. By any chance is she available?"

"Harry Potter? You were the young man at the station, weren't you?" For a second, Harry thought the woman's voice seemed to register disapproval. Then, he shook his head. He was just imagining things. "Just a moment," she said. Harry could hear Hermione's mother move away from the phone and then call out to her daughter. Seconds later, there was the sound of running feet and then a squeal that almost made Harry drop the receiver.

"*HARRY POTTER!* Where have you been?! We've all been worried sick about you!"

Harry was surprised by the unexpected outburst. "You have? And who's 'we'?"

"Neville, Blaise and myself. Oh, and Theo, though I only hear from him second-hand through Blaise. Apparently, he's very paranoid about sending owls to and from Malfoy Manor. Understandable I suppose. But anyway, we've all been sending you owl posts for two weeks now and haven't heard anything from you. Blaise has been threatening to send Gunther to kick in the Dursleys' door and rescue you." She paused. "You *didn't* actually *need* rescuing, did you? I'll never hear the end of it if you did and I talked Blaise out of saving you in some dramatic fashion."

Harry laughed. "No, I haven't needed saving. It's just been boring and lonely here. It's rather odd though because I've been sending owls out to you lot as well and never heard back from anyone. Posts to and from my solicitors get through fine, but nothing from any fellow students I've written to. Dumbledore was supposed to have put up some

wards here when I was first dropped off. Maybe he included a post owl ward or some such nonsense. Anyway, I'll have Hestia and Artie look into it now that I know that it's an actual thing and not everyone just ignoring me." He laughed at that. "In the meantime, could you owl Blaise and Neville and let them know I'm okay and it's just an issue with owl delivery?"

"Of course," Hermione replied. "Though Neville is out of country at the moment. He and Lady Augusta are in the Amazonian jungle on an expedition to find some rare plant specimens. They won't be back until the 15th, and I doubt an owl could find him before then. Anyway, other than lack of communication, how has your summer been?"

"Not bad. I've finished my homework. I have my own TV for the first time in my life, but there never seems to be anything good on so I don't know that I missed much. I don't have to cook for anyone but myself, although I'm getting a bit tired of cold sandwiches and Ramen noodles cooked in a microwave. On the bright side, I start tutoring tomorrow. I'm a bit excited about that."

"Tutoring? But we can't use our wands during the summer, can we?" Hermione asked.

"Well, as is usually the case, there are loopholes put in place for the benefit of the rich and well-connected that are big enough to drive a lorry through them. There's a license you can apply for from the Ministry that lets you use your wand over the summer for limited times provided you're supervised by an adult who gets Ministry approval. My solicitors got it set up for me. They don't mention it at Hogwarts because it's bloody expensive, and I guess they don't want the less wealthy parents to complain about the inherent unfairness of it all. I wrote you all about it in one of

those owl posts that disappeared into the netherworld or whatever."

"How expensive are we talking, Harry? And don't say '*bloody*.' It's impolite."

"Ah, I've missed you, Hermione. Anyway, all told, I'm dropping nearly two-thousand Galleons on tutoring this summer. I reckon that's close to £10,000. Not all school-related stuff, though. I'm also learning about politics, etiquette, estate planning and also flying lessons at some point."

"Ten-thousand pounds! Eep! Well, if it's all the same, I think I'll stick to self-study for now. If I can't keep up with you – not to mention all the Purebloods like Malfoy who are probably getting tutoring as well – I'll talk to my parents for next summer. Besides, we've already made plans to go to France for three weeks, so I probably wouldn't have time anyway. So, what's your tutor like?"

"No idea. I haven't actually met her yet. She's a Hufflepuff who graduated near the top of her class. She's got a gap year before she starts at the Auror Academy and wants to make a little spending money. Her name is Tonks."

"Just ... Tonks?"

"Just Tonks. According to Artie, she *has* a first name but she doesn't like it so she just uses her surname for everything. Not even a 'Miss' in front of it."

"So ... Tonks, then. Like 'Madonna' or 'Cher.'"

"Nope, sorry. No idea who either of them are. Raised in a boot cupboard, remember?"

Hermione sighed. She knew Harry's occasionally shocking black humor masked a lot of pain and bitterness, but phone conferences were not the proper setting to talk to him seriously about it, so she decided not to rise to the bait.

"Well from now on, Harry, just leave the television on MTV while you study. You can absorb the entirety of Muggle pop culture through osmosis."

He laughed. "Oh, before I forget. Will you be back in London by the 31st? That's my birthday, and I'd like to do, well, something. I don't want a party, really, but maybe me, you, Neville and Blaise could take in a movie or something."

"I'd love to. I'll forward the invitation to Blaise and Neville." She hesitated. "I should tell you – your parents sent me an invitation to a birthday party for Jim at Potter Manor for the 31st. I haven't responded yet."

"Were you interested in going?"

"Had you not wanted to do something that day, I might have considered it. I mean, he *is* in my house, so we do need to at least *try* to get along. And if I can make peace with Draco Malfoy, surely I can do it with Jim Potter. But I'd rather spend the day with you, and I'm sure Neville will feel the same."

Harry was pleased and immediately started counting the days to when he'd see his friends again.

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## 2 July 1992

Late the next afternoon, Harry locked and bolted the main door to his room. Then, he exited out the invisible magic



door in his back wall and went down the invisible magic stairs both of which had been installed just weeks before. For about the hundredth time in the last year, he grinned infectiously at the possibilities of magic. Then, he walked around to the front of the house and stopped short, his smile falling away. Petunia was in the front yard wearing a silly-looking broad-brimmed hat and armed with a pair of garden shears that she was using to brutally mutilate an innocent rose bush. For a second, Harry felt a pang of sadness. As much as he'd hated being the Dursleys' slave and whipping boy for so many years, he took justifiable pride in how well he'd maintained Petunia's award-winning flower garden, just as he took pride in how well he'd cooked meals for his three hateful relatives – elaborate, fancy meals which they'd all slurped down without even a single compliment. Briefly, he'd considered the idea of offering to cook meals downstairs on occasion, but only with the understanding that he'd be allowed to eat his fair share and sit at the table like a proper person. No more of this "cook Beef Wellington for the Dursleys while living off burnt toast and tap water" rubbish. He'd mentioned the idea to Hermione on the phone the day before, and she'd rather hotly explained to him about a Muggle concept called Stockholm Syndrome that caused kidnapping victims to feel a desire to please their captors.

Petunia glanced up at him and made a face of undisguised loathing. Then, she went back to Harry's poor roses and attacked them with renewed vigor. With the tiniest amount of regret (for the roses, not their assailant), Harry walked past Petunia to the sidewalk and headed down the street. A few blocks away from 4 Privet Drive, Harry looked around to make sure no one was on the street watching him. Then, he pulled out his wand and held it out in a "thumb's up" gesture, just as Artie had demonstrated. Seconds later, he was startled by the sudden arrival of a bright red *triple-*

decker bus – the Knight Bus. Amused by the bus's appearance and by the nervous introduction of one Stan Shunpike (apparently, it was young Shunpike's first week on the job as bus conductor), Harry announced his destination as the Leaky Cauldron and then settled in for a quick if mildly terrifying ride. Not long after, a somewhat nauseous Harry Potter stepped off the bus and into the Leaky Cauldron, making his way upstairs to Room 13, which was a small but heavily-warded meeting room that Artie Podmore's firm kept permanently rented out for private conferences such as this. Inside, Podmore and two other wizards were waiting for him.

"Good afternoon, Harry," said Artie. "Any problems getting here?"

"None at all, Artie. Thanks." Harry looked expectantly towards the other two men, both of whom seemed to be defined by how incredibly nondescript and average-looking they were.

"Harry, let me introduce... Well, I suppose 'introduce' isn't the right word. Harry, this is Mr. X and this is Mr. Y." Harry crooked an eyebrow. "They are here under glamours and Anonymity Charms to conceal their identities, but both of them have sworn oaths to me that they are the individuals with whom the firm has contracted in this matter as well as secrecy oaths that they will not reveal the mere fact that you're studying Occlumency to anyone else. Likewise, I have sworn an oath not to reveal either of their identities to you or anyone else. While their actions today are not illegal, they are sufficiently ... sketchy in the eyes of the Ministry that neither wishes to use his real identity. I assure you that this is quite common where Occlumency training is concerned."

He gestured towards each man in turn. "Mr. X is a seventh-level adept at both Occlumency and Legilimency. Mr. Y is a fifth-level Occlumens and also a licensed and bonded Obliviator who normally works for the Ministry but is acting today in a freelance capacity. In just a minute, Mr. Y will use the first part of the Memory Lock Charm on Mr. X and then leave the room, along with myself. Mr. X will then spend the next hour examining your mind and your memories with Legilimency in order to determine the strength of your Occlumency shields, and then he'll provide you with a course of mental exercises designed to improve those shields and to develop other psychic protections. During your session, you will also give Mr. X a password of some kind that will allow him to remember this session in the future. Even if you don't want him to ever remember this session, the nature of the spell requires that a password exist. It doesn't have to be anything complicated, but it should be something that won't come up in casual conversation. At the end of the session, Mr. Y will come back in and use the second part of the Memory Lock spell on Mr. X to complete the memory block."

Harry was rather impressed by the level of secrecy involved in this endeavor. "Memory Lock Charm? I've never heard of that."

Mr. Y explained in a slightly foreign accent. "The original versions of the Memory Charm and the False Memory Charm are both three hundred years old, and they can both be overcome relatively easy through things like Legilimency and Rememberalls. The Ministry banned all further private research into memory-altering charms but later developed improved versions of the original two for official government use. You have to be licensed by the Ministry to learn them, and you have to swear magical oaths limiting your ability to use them and making it nearly impossible for

you to teach others who are not licensed. The Memory Lock Charm cannot be broken by any known means except by knowing the password. And pursuant to the oath I swore when I learned it, I cannot use that Charm against any other wizard or witch unless they consent or else pursuant to a judicial decree from the Wizengamot. Otherwise, the spell fails to complete itself. Mr. X here has already consented to Obliviation after this session, but for your benefit, he'll repeat the oath before we start."

Harry blinked. "Does this sort of thing happen often?"

"You'd be surprised," said Mr. X in a silky voice. "In the wizarding world, it's quite common to learn something you shouldn't and then have the memory erased for your own protection or that of others. The Unspeakables are all well-trained in self-Obliviation for that purpose."

Harry shuddered a bit at that. Once again, he was reminded of what a strange world he had entered, one where people sometimes felt the need to give themselves amnesia in order to forget dangerous truths.

Mr. Y nodded at Mr. X who held out his wand and said "I freely consent to the Obliviation of my memories of all events that occur, all statements made, and all memories observed in this room for the next hour. So mote it be." Mr. X's wand glowed softly for a second. Mr. Y then moved behind Mr. X so that neither Harry nor Artie could see his wand movements, and he said an incantation too soft for Harry to hear. A violet light briefly shown from Mr. X's eyes, and Mr. Y nodded to Artie that the spell had taken hold properly.

"Okay, Harry. If you get done early, pull that cord on the wall to ring the bell downstairs. Otherwise, we'll be back in

an hour." The two men left, and Mr. X gestured for Harry to sit at the table across from him.

"Before we begin, Mr. Potter, what training have you had? A tutor? Or just books?"

"Um, just books. I've read all of **Moste Hidden Arte** and the first few chapters of **Pathways of the Mind**. That one's, um, kind of hard to understand."

"It's also kind of illegal to own, so don't get caught with it. There are no criminal penalties, but the fine is several thousand Galleons and you'll be on a Ministry watch list for the rest of your life."

Harry gulped and nodded at the other man. *"What the hell kind of Christmas present did Blaise give me?"* he thought to himself.

"Now then, having read **Moste Hidden Arte**, I assume you understand the basic principle of clearing the mind."

"In the abstract, but none of the examples in the book really seem to get the point across."

"Unsurprising, I suppose. It is a very old and traditional text. **Aegis Mentalis** explains the principles involved in a more approachable manner if you can find a copy of that, but it too is banned by the Ministry. To greatly oversimplify things, clearing your mind means achieving a state in which you have no conscious thoughts at all so that an intruding Legilimens has nothing to hang onto and use as a frame of reference for further intrusion. A true thoughtless state is extremely difficult to maintain unless you undertake an intensive study of Zen meditation or something similar. But such is not truly necessary to maintain reliable Occlumency shields capable of resisting Legilmency. All that is required

is that you be able to sense an intruding mind and then reflexively suppress all thought, thus expelling the intruder. Now, let's try a simple approach. Can you think of any repetitive activity you have engaged in for long periods of time? Neither a pleasant one nor an unpleasant one, but merely one where you are likely to lose track of time?"

Harry thought for a moment and recalled seeing Petunia's pitiful attempts at gardening earlier. "My relatives used to make me do all their gardening all summer long. Weeding is like that. Boring but not unpleasant. A few times I was surprised at how long I'd spent pulling weeds out from among the rose bushes after zoning out."

Mr. X nodded. "Good. Let us start with that. I will attempt to read your memories. You will hopefully recognize my efforts when you start to think about things that are not germane to our present circumstance. Understand that I will, for the time being, be extremely obvious in my efforts. A skilled Legilimens can subtly guide your thoughts so that you will recall the memories he wishes to see without you noticing anything is amiss. Our goal for future sessions is for you to become able to sense intrusions with increasing subtlety. Also, I will be using both wand and incantation today. Be advised that a fifth level adept at Legilimency can work the magic both wandlessly and wordlessly, so you must ever be on your guard whenever someone you do not trust makes eye contact with you."

Harry nodded. Privately, he wondered how long it would take him to become insanely paranoid and whether that was, in fact, the natural state of an Occlumens.

"Now, as soon as you realize that you are thinking of things you do not wish to think about, focus your mind on that sensation of thoughtlessness you feel when deeply

immersed in your gardening. I apologize in advance, but in order to most effectively evaluate you, I must focus on the memories that you find most traumatic, most painful, or most private. It is for that reason that I have agreed to Obliviation at the conclusion of this session.

Now, ***LEGILIMENS!*** "

Harry was startled by Mr. X's tone of voice when he barked out the incantation. For some reason, it reminded him of how Vernon Dursley shouted at him when he'd been six years old and had accidentally spilled bacon grease on Vernon's shirt. The wretched Muggle had been furious. He'd grabbed Harry by the arm and yanked him towards his cupboard so forcefully that there was a loud snap, followed by a scream of agony from the boy. To this day, he could still clearly recall the pain of a broken arm. Vernon and Petunia argued for several minutes about whether it was necessary to take Harry to the Emergency Room or not, with Vernon inclined to just throw him in the cupboard and see how he looked after a few days. Petunia, however ...

Harry inhaled sharply. "*Why am I thinking about that?*" As he continued to look into Mr. X's eyes, he was astonished and frightened to realize how powerful Legilimency was when he didn't have the option of just avoiding eye contact. He took a slower breath and then focused his mind on the peace and serenity he felt when he was immersed in his gardening. It took him a minute or so to reliably focus on the gardening sensation, during which time he faltered repeatedly as Mr. X caused him to remember painful or unpleasant memories of Petunia shouting at him over his gardening efforts, memories which then led inexorably to even worse memories before Harry realized what was happening and redoubled his efforts to keep Mr. X out. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity but was actually

less than ten minutes, Mr. X waved his wand in front of Harry's face and ended the spell.

"Alright, first the good news. While it took you several minutes to realize that I was actively drawing out the memory of when your uncle broke your arm, on my subsequent attempts, you reacted much more readily. You were able to establish a clear mind relatively quickly and by the end were able to maintain it for a full minute, resisting all my attempts to read you during that time."

"And the bad news?"

"What you just experienced was my absolute lowest level of mental power, and I was deliberately targeting memories that you would normally suppress which only made it easier to resist me. Had I applied my full power, you would not have been able to block me at all, and had I exercised any degree of discretion, you would likely never have even noticed my presence."

"Oh," said Harry somewhat dejectedly.

"Do not give up though, Mr. Potter. I am, after all, a seventh-level adept at Legilimency, and you are not likely to encounter many Legilimens with my skill. I definitely think you have potential as an Occlumens. Unfortunately, save for the rare prodigy, Occlumency is simply something that takes time and effort, usually years of both. To have come as far as you have before reaching the age of twelve is quite an achievement and a testament to your dedication. Now, let us try again. **LEGILIMENS!**"

With that, the lesson continued for another forty minutes, at the end of which, Mr. X provided Harry with a Headache-Relief Potion. He then went over a number of mental exercises that he wanted Harry to practice several times a



day for the next two weeks, after which they would meet again.

"Two final matters, Mr. Potter. First, are you aware of the fact that you have several gaps in your memory? Not Obliviations, as I suspect you still retain access to the memories in question. Rather, they are all very high level memory blocks designed to obscure the memories from Legilimency. All of them seem to start when you enter a particular corridor in your dormitory and which end as you exit it into the Common Room."

Harry stiffened. Mr. X was talking about the Prince's Lair. "Yes, Mr. X. I am aware of those blocks. They're not something you need to worry about."

"I see. Very well. Secondly ... I have a favor to ask." Mr. X suddenly looked down at his hands which were tightly folded on the table. It was the first bit of real emotion the man had shown all afternoon. "From your memories ... I now know that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named survived to some extent the events of 1981 and that he seeks to become fully resurrected."

Harry was quite shocked at Mr. X's words. He hadn't even noticed when those memories were drawn forth. "In a few moments," Mr. X continued, "that knowledge will be taken from me until such time as you use the restoration phrase to restore my memories, if you ever choose to do so. I ask you..." The man suddenly looked up at Harry with an anguished expression. "No, I beg you – if you ever learn that he is close to bodily resurrection, *please* restore my memories of your encounter with him. I have a family. A wife and two children. With enough warning, I can get them out of the country if ..."

Harry interrupted. "How do I set the restoration phrase?"

"... You say *Celaverimus* and then whatever word or phrase you wish to use, Mr. Potter. Once set, you can relay it verbally or even in writing, provided you make it clear the message is from you."

"*Celaverimus: Voldemort is back.*"

Mr. X stiffened as the magic settled over him. "Thank you, Mr. Potter."

"Thank *you*, Mr. X."

Moments later, Artie and Mr. Y reentered and Mr. X rose. "My work here is done. We will meet again in two weeks time." He nodded at Mr. Y who pulled out his wand and cast the second part of the Memory Block Charm. Mr. X looked around in confusion for a few seconds. Then, he pulled out a pocket watch and checked the time. He shook his head. "That will never *not* be disturbing to me. Until next time, gentlemen."

With that, Mr. X and Mr. Y left. Harry sat back down with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Any problems, Harry?" asked Artie.

"Not with the lesson, Artie." He hesitated. "Are you an Occlumens? One good enough to keep my secrets?"

"I've had Occlumency training. I'm probably close to being a fourth-level adept. But it doesn't matter for *your* secrets, because I swore the solicitor's oath to you. I can't help you conceal a crime and am duty bound to inform the authorities if you tell me you're planning to commit one. Other than that, anything you tell me is covered by magical

client confidentiality and can't be revealed by Legilimency or Veritaserum. So what's on your mind?"

Harry considered whether to reveal to the man that Voldemort lived. Finally, he decided that he was not ready to reveal that, not even to his solicitor. But there were other steps he could take. "How much is a pensieve, Artie? I have some personal memories that I'd like to leave with you. Memories I want locked away unless I tell you to review them or ... unless something happens to me. Can we do that?"

Artie's eyes shot up in surprise. "Of course. And you don't even need to buy a pensieve. The goblins came through with the asset list and you already own one. A good one, complete with a shrinking enchantment so it's easy to transport. I'll get it from the vault and have it for you by next week. You can copy the memories you want then and I'll put them in a safe place."

"Thanks, Artie." Harry looked at his watch. "It's late. I'd better get home."

"You and me both, Harry. Elizabeth always has a fit when I work through dinner. She'd be even worse if she knew 'work' consisted of sitting downstairs having a few pints with Mr. Y while we waited for you to finish your session."

Harry laughed. "So I'm starting wand training with this ... Tonks person on Saturday morning, right? Where are we meeting?" Artie pulled out some parchment and jotted down the address to a building further down Diagon Alley which was home to a local dueling club. There was a large room with magically reinforced walls that could resist damaging spellfire. Harry smiled. "Damaging spellfire" was

one of his favorite phrases.

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## ***4 July 1992***

By three o'clock on Saturday afternoon, Harry had changed his mind and decided that "damaging spellfire" was actually one of his least favorite phrases, a conclusion he reached while lying flat on his back in the dueling room and wondering if any parts of him were still on fire. He'd arrived at that morning at 10:00 as per Artie's arrangements. Tonks seemed very serious at first, mainly because it was her first teaching experience and, like most Hufflepuffs, she was earnest and conscientious to a fault. Accordingly, the first two hours were spent on nothing but healing and shielding spells, with a particular emphasis on Renervate, Episkey and Protego. This was after she presented Harry with an emergency portkey to St. Mungo's that she'd insisted Artie provide "in case anything went *really* bad."

At noon, Harry treated Tonks to lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, and she began to loosen up a bit. She admitted to being a bit nervous around Harry due to more than her lack of teaching experience. Although she knew Harry was "on the outs" with his family, he was still the eldest son of James Potter, who was a senior auror and would likely be supervising her at some point. She had been a little leery of getting caught up in the "Potter Family Drama," but she also wanted income of her own as she was a Hogwarts graduate and felt uncomfortable still relying on her parents for spending money. Harry assured her that all of his tutoring was kept confidential and that James Potter would never find out from him that she was his tutor. By dessert,

she'd even admitted two personal secrets to him. First, she was a Metamorphmagus with the power to change her own appearance at will, a talent she'd manifested since early childhood. She even showed off for Harry by briefly turning her hair bubblegum pink. That was what clinched her position at the Auror Academy. She'd wanted to be an auror anyway, but there was an unofficial government policy that all but required known Metamorphmagi to work for the government in some capacity. The other secret was that she and Harry were distant relatives. Her mother was a private healer named Andromeda Tonks *nee* Black and Harry's late grandmother Dorea Black was Andromeda's great-aunt. She admitted when asked that she was a cousin to Sirius Black but claimed that she never knew him as she'd only been a small child when he went to prison. She indicated that her mother had been on the outs with the Black family due to marrying a Muggleborn, and she didn't think Andromeda had seen Sirius in years at the time of his arrest.

After lunch, the two finally got down to combat magic, which was what Harry most wanted to learn. She gave him the usual lectures about how he shouldn't be dueling in the Hogwarts corridors, and he reassured her that he merely had a strong interest in dueling competitively and the DADA teachers at Hogwarts were traditionally of poor quality to which she could only agree. He did not mention that the last one had been an agent for a still-living Voldemort.

And so, the two spent the next three hours covering a variety of Second and Third Year combat charms and hexes. Expelliarmus, Diffindo, and Immobilus were obviously useful, but Harry was intrigued by the possibilities of Depulso and Oppugno. The former was the Knockback Jinx, which could fling the target back a good ten to twenty feet with considerable force. The Oppugno Hex was combined

with targeting words and would cause the target to attack an enemy of the wizard's choice. For example, Avis could be used to summon a flock of birds, but Avis Oppugno would cause those birds to swarm against an enemy. But best of all, Tonks taught Harry how to perform Serpentsortia, the Snake-Summoning Charm.

"I figured as a Slytherin, this might be a useful Charm to know," she said with a wink.

"Indeed," Harry said mildly while itching to see how the conjured snake reacted to Parseltongue. As with Avis, combining Serpentsortia with Oppugno would cause the conjured serpent to attack Harry's enemy without further direction from him, but he suspected that any snakes *he* conjured could do a lot more than that.

Their lesson ended at four, at which point Tonks cast the notification spell that informed the Ministry that Harry was once more forbidden to use magic. She also took back the portkey as Harry was not old enough to possess it without Ministry approval (which Hestia was currently trying to get). Then, Tonks headed home while Harry spent some time exploring Diagon Alley. He made a brief foray into Flourish & Botts and ordered some books on dueling and defense training that would be owl-delivered the following week. He also took in an early supper at the Leaky Cauldron before heading home on the Knight Bus, which dropped him off at a petrol station about three blocks from the Dursley residence. Harry was quite pleased with how the day had gone and was looking forward to an hour or so of television followed by an early bedtime. Naturally, that was when things went pear-shaped.

Just as Harry was about to turn off the sidewalk and into the Dursley's driveway, there was a sudden flash of light

accompanied by a loud "pop," and the boy was knocked flat on his back. He blinked his eyes for a few seconds and was surprised to realize that there was now a small creature sitting on his stomach, a pitiful goggle-eyed thing with long droopy ears and a filthy tea towel worn as a tunic. Harry recognized the creature as a house elf from the descriptions Blaise and Theo had made of their own family servants. Immediately, the elf began to shriek at him.

"THE POTTER CHILD MUST NOT RETURN TO HOGGYWARTS!"

"What?!" exclaimed Harry in confusion. "What is this? Who are you?"

"NEVER MIND WHO I IS! THE POTTER CHILD MUST NOT RETURN TO HOGGYWARTS! GREAT EVIL IS COMING THERE! WANTS TO *KILL* POTTER CHILD!"

"Kill?!" Harry suddenly looked around in confusion. "We're on a *public street*! You can't be seen here! It violates the Statute of Secrecy! And anyway, what is this evil and who wants to kill me? If it's Voldemort, I already know about him and I plan to kill him right back if I get the chance!"

"OOOOO!" wailed the elf piteously. "THE POTTER CHILD MUST NOT SAY THAT NAME!"

"STOP SHOUTING!" yelled Harry.

The elf's mouth snapped shut, and he grabbed his ears and pulled them down into a makeshift gag.

"Look," said Harry, who sat up as the elf jumped down to the sidewalk. "Let's start over. What's your name?" As he spoke, the boy looked around but saw no signs that any Muggles had noticed his confrontation with the elf.

"Oooooo!" wailed the elf more quietly. "Dobby cannot tell the Potter child his name! If it got back to Dobby's masters that Dobby had warned the Potter child of danger, Dobby's head would be mounted on the Wall of Shame!"

Harry considered that mental image for a second. "Well, then, I guess it's a good thing I don't know Dobby's name," he said drily. "Look, can you at least tell me more about this ... evil that wants to kill me?"

"No, no! Dobby can give no details! Dobby will already have to iron his ears for doing this much! Besides, why would Potter child want to go back to cold drafty castle where his friends don't even write him letters!"

Harry focused past the gruesome vision of the poor elf ironing its own ears as a self-inflicted punishment to the second part of that outburst. "*You're* the reason that my owl posts haven't been getting here!" he accused.

With that, Dobby began to hop up and down in agitation before finally reaching into his tunic and pulling out a stack of letters wrapped up in twine. "Dobby thought if Potter child thought Potter child's friends didn't care enough to write, he might not go back to Hoggywarts? But Potter child talked to his girl-child friend with Mugglesy speaking gourd so that did not work." Dobby looked at Harry with what he no doubt thought was a cunning expression. "If Dobby gives Potter child his letters, will he promise not to go back to Hoggywarts?"

"No, I will do no such thing. And stop calling me '*Potter child*.' I'm nearly twelve. Call me Harry."

"Dobby knows this Potter child is called Harry. But Dobby does not know which Potter child is in danger and so must protect both!"



Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his temples for a few seconds. "You know that there is some ... evil coming to Hogwarts that will try to kill one of the Potter children but you don't even know which one? You do know that my brother Jim is the Boy-Who-Lived, right? People have been trying to kill him since he was a baby. I'm sure he's the one you should be bothering now instead of me."

Dobby shrugged earnestly. "Better safe than sorry?"

Harry sighed. "Dobby, listen carefully. I have to go to Hogwarts. If I don't, I can't get educated and become a wizard. If I don't become a wizard, my birth father will cheat me out of my inheritance, and if I'm *lucky*, I'll end up living in a cardboard box under an overpass."

"Better a cardboard box under overpass than a wooden box under ground, Harry Potter!"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Not to me, Dobby. I'll die before I let James Potter beat me."

"Ooooo!" Dobby moaned once more. Then, the house elf suddenly froze, the way a small woodland creature animal might freeze upon detecting a nearby a predator. Slowly, Dobby turned his head to the right to stare off into the distance.

"Harry Potter must go into his mean family's house, *right now!*" Dobby suddenly hissed.

"What? What is it?" Harry asked suddenly concerned.

"Dobby must go! Dobby cannot be found here! Run home, Harry Potter! *Run for your life!*"

With that, the strange house elf popped away leaving behind the bound letters. Quickly, Harry scrambled to his feet and looked around, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He picked up his letters and then carefully made his way onto the grounds of 4 Privet Drive. Just then, he heard an unfamiliar noise from behind him. He looked back and realized it was a faint buzzing, but one growing louder every second. Suddenly, in the dim twilight, he saw a cloud of small winged figures, each no larger than a man's hand, rise up over the house across the street and head in his direction, buzzing angrily as they drew nearer. Harry's heart skipped a beat. Doxies – small venomous faerie-like creatures. One on one, they were a minor pest. The dozens heading his way? That was enough to eat the boy alive.

Knowing that he wouldn't have time to make it around the house to his stairway entrance, Harry ran to the front door as fast as he could, but it was already locked. He turned around and saw that the swarm was nearly upon him.

*"There had better be some sort of 'emergency exception' to the Underage Magic prohibitions,"* Harry thought as his wand popped out of its wrist holster. **"ALOHOMORA!"** The door unlocked itself, and Harry dashed inside, slamming and locking the door behind him. Inside, the Dursleys were all sitting in front of the TV. The three looked at Harry with a mixture of surprise and disgust. Then, before Harry could explain, Petunia screamed and pointed at the window. Harry looked over and saw that there was a pile of doxies clawing at the glass. He moved over to check the window.

"It's alright. The wards on the house are holding. They can't get inside." Harry exhaled, relieved to feel safe.

"What ARE those?!" shrieked Petunia.

"Doxies. Normally, they're just pests, but someone decided to send a whole swarm of them after me. They're venomous meat-eaters, but they can't get inside."

"You brought these things to our house," Vernon said quietly.

"I didn't *bring* them anywhere," said Harry irritably, his attention still on the doxies clawing at the window.

"Someone sent them after me and they followed me here. We need to send a message to the Ministry. They have people who deal with this sort of..."

"You brought these things to our house," Vernon said even more quietly. Harry froze. Vernon Dursley never did *anything* quietly. The boy turned towards his uncle just in time to see the big meaty fist a second before it smashed into his face. He dropped to the ground, dazed, his wand falling out of his grasp and rolling under the couch. Then, Vernon picked Harry up by the front of his shirt and shook him violently.

"YOU BROUGHT THESE THINGS TO OUR HOUSE!" he screamed in an absolute fury. Harry shook his head to clear it and glimpsed something in Vernon's eyes that had never been there before in any of his past rages. It was like some sort of fuse had blown in Dursley's mind. Vernon looked towards the window which was still covered in doxies. Then, with a sick grin, he picked up Harry limp body and carried him, past a hysterical Petunia and a terrified Dudley, to the back door. With a free hand, the Muggle jerked the door open. Then, he hurled Harry out into the backyard as far as he could. "SUPPERTIME!" he bellowed as loudly as he could before slamming the door shut and locking it.

Harry scrambled to his feet and then staggered towards the door, nearly falling as he did. He pounded on the back door in terror, begging to be let in. Then, he heard the buzzing and skittering of the doxie swarm as it rolled over the house towards his location. In the distance, he saw an owl heading his way clutching an official-looking letter of some kind in its talons. The poor creature tried unsuccessfully to change direction and escape before a quartet of doxies fell upon it and ripped it apart. The rest of the swarm had a bigger quarry – Harry.

The boy pounded once more on the back door and begged for the Dursleys to let him inside. Through the window, he could see the Dursleys staring at him with what looked like quiet satisfaction. Then, he screamed as the first set of tiny vicious talons dug into his back of his neck.

Vernon smiled.

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# Healers and Hospitals

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 2: Healers and Hospitals

*8 July 1992*

Harry's eyes fluttered open painfully, and he took in his new surroundings in confusion. He was lying in a comfortable single bed in a sparsely decorated but rather homey room. Early morning sunlit filtered in through the window blinds and was reflected in the multicolored crystals of a mobile that was hanging over his head. Almost immediately, Harry sneezed due to the spicy aroma of dozens of multicolored candles situated around the room. Then, he bit back a hiss of pain as a burning ache rocketed through his entire body from the sudden movement. Instantly, as if in response to his pain, the crystal mobile started to jangle discordantly.

Barely a minute later, the door opened, and a middle-aged man with thinning blonde hair and a friendly face entered the room. He wore a flowing white robe with a blue caduceus symbol that reminded Harry of the robes Madame Pomfrey sometimes wore in the school infirmary. The robe was open in the front, however, and looked more like a doctor's lab coat, and Harry was surprised to see that the healer also wore a pair of Muggle trousers, a button-down shirt, a bowtie ... and fuzzy brown house slippers designed to look like small animals of some kind. "Good morning, Mr. Potter. So good to see you're back with us. Tonks is the name. Ted Tonks. I gather my daughter's been giving you defense lessons."

"Only one ..." the boy coughed painfully. His whole body was sore, and his throat was so raw he could barely speak above a whisper. "Only one session so far. Unfortunately ... we didn't cover cheap shots and doxy swarms on the first day. How did I get ... wherever here is?"

"*Here* is the Tonks Clinic. My wife Andromeda and I operate a clinic out of our home in Hogsmeade for the benefit of locals who don't want to go all the way to St. Mungo's for minor ailments. Normally, Andie handles pediatric patients, but she's currently in France teaching a seminar on medical healing at Beauxbatons so you're stuck with me. Anyway, your solicitor Miss Jones had you brought in over the weekend because ... well, I gather it was because there might be some sort of complications if you went to St. Mungo's."

As the healer spoke, he calmly removed several burnt out candles and replaced them with new ones that sparkled in the sunlight coming in through the window, as if glitter had been mixed in with the candle wax. Then, he pulled some wire "half-moon" spectacles from a pocket and donned them while examining the arrangement of crystals in the mobile. Dissatisfied for some inscrutable reason pertaining to "chakras," he rearranged several crystals so that their reflected light would strike Harry in some more auspicious manner.

"What sort of complications?" asked Harry as he tried to figure out the purpose behind the healer's seemingly random actions.

"Well," he said, "severe doxy poisoning is the sort of thing you can go to St. Mungo's for without anyone batting an eye, Mr. Potter. But accompanied by a black eye, a fractured jaw and a concussion? That's the sort of thing that gets

people talking, especially for someone in your circumstances."

At that, Harry remembered that had happened – that Vernon Dursley had struck him hard enough to nearly knock him out and then thrown him out to be devoured by the doxy swarm. *"Yeah,"* he thought. *"Nearly getting murdered by your guardian who is also your estranged parents' brother-in-law might definitely get people talking."*

Harry shifted his position, grimacing in pain as he did. "What day is it?"

"Tuesday the 8th at quarter to nine in the a.m. You've been in a healing coma since around eight o'clock on Saturday night. The process by which doxy venom is neutralized is extremely painful, so I thought it best you sleep through as much of the experience as possible. You woke up a wee bit ahead of schedule," Ted suddenly glanced down at his feet and then looked back up sheepishly, "hence the badger slippers."

Harry laughed and then winced from the pain. *"So that was what they were supposed to be,"* he thought to himself. *"Badger slippers. What else would a Hufflepuff wear around the house. I wonder if they come in a snake theme."*

"What can you tell me about what happened last Saturday night, Healer Tonks?" he asked aloud.

"Call me Ted, Mr. Potter. I'm Muggleborn, you see, and never really went in for Pureblood etiquette." There was a chime that rang somewhere nearby. "Ah, do hold that thought, Mr. Potter. I believe company's arrived that can answer all your questions better than I." Ted stepped out of the room for just a moment and then returned with Hestia Jones and, to Harry's surprise, Professor Snape. The latter

was carrying several vials which Ted took and held up to the light to examine. The healer returned to Harry's bedside and handed one of the vials to the boy. "That will soothe your throat a bit and make speaking easier," he said. While Harry drank the potion, Ted waved his wand over the boy in a complicated pattern.

"Hmm. Alright, Mr. Potter..."

"Harry," he said less painfully. "I was Muggle-raised too, so if we're going to be on a first name basis, might as well be mutual."

Ted smiled. "Alright, *Harry*. I know you have questions, so I'm giving you five minutes to ask what you want from Miss Jones and Professor Snape. Then, you'll be drinking the rest of these potions the good Professor has prepared, and they'll put you back to sleep for the rest of the day and all night until the last of the venom is been neutralized. You'll be right as rain in the morning."

"Thank you, Ted." He looked over at the other two. Hestia looked horrified at his condition, while Snape wore his usual emotionless mask.

"I *knew* we should have gotten you a personal emergency portkey," she spat. "And by tomorrow we *will* have one for you even if I have to wring Violetta Edgecombe's neck to get it!"

"It's okay, Hestia," he said softly while trying not to move too much. "I'm alive. That's what matters. Although I would like to know how I got here. I thought I was done for. The last thing I remember is ..." His voice trailed off. The last thing he remembered was Vernon's smile.



Snape stepped forward. "I believe it would be best if you were to go first and tell us what you remember, Potter. Then, Miss Jones can fill in the gaps."

Harry nodded and told what he remembered from Saturday night. His strange encounter with Dobby. The swarm of doxies. How Vernon had sucker-punched him and thrown him out to die. Then, he looked concerned for a moment.

"Also, I remember using Alohomora to get inside the house. Am I going to be in trouble for underage magic?"

"Actually," said Hestia, "that little misdemeanor probably saved your life. It registered with the Office of Underage Magic, and they sent a First Offense owl notice to the Dursleys. As your registered solicitor, I got a courtesy copy and immediately knew something bad must have happened with those Muggles, so I apparated straight there. You were already unconscious, but I was able to shoo most of the doxies away from you and set up a protective shield. Then, just a minute or so later, the aurors showed up. Apparently, the doxies killed the Ministry owl that was carrying your Underage Magic warning."

"I saw that," said Harry with a sick expression. "They ripped the poor thing apart. It was awful."

"I've no doubt," she continued. "But the important thing for us is that the Ministry pays attention to its official owls, and when one of them gets killed while delivering an official legal notice, aurors automatically get dispatched to the scene. Two of them showed up and were able to eradicate the doxies. Then, I had one of them transport you here while the other auror and I went in to talk to the Dursleys. You'll be happy to know that all of your personal possessions are now at our offices. Well, except for this

one." With a smile, she reached into her handbag and produced Harry's wand. The boy smiled in relief.

"Thanks. I was afraid Vernon might have snapped it."

"It had rolled under the couch. When it wasn't on your person or among your things, I used the Summoning Charm. Also, to answer your earlier question, you *are* allowed to use underage magic for self-defense. The auror report made it clear that you were defending yourself against an unusually large doxy swarm, and I've already filed the paperwork to expunge that First Warning from your file."

Harry sighed. "So ... what happens next? Somebody wants to kill me, and the Dursleys are happy to help them."

Snape stepped forward. "What happens next, Potter, is that you will rest and allow Healer Tonks to complete his work. We shall return tomorrow morning to discuss your future living arrangements."

Minutes later, Harry was sleeping peacefully, and the three adults stepped out of the room.

"I noticed you didn't mention his uncle's status, Severus," said Hestia.

"Neither did you," he replied while staring off into space thoughtfully.

"Neither one of you mentioned it to me either," said Ted. "What about the bastard? Please tell me he's rotting in a Ministry holding cell."

"Not just yet, unfortunately," said Hestia. "While he was being interviewed by the auror, Vernon Dursley suffered a

massive heart attack. He's presently in intensive care in a Muggle hospital."

"A heart attack, you say?" said Ted mildly. "How convenient."

The witch stiffened. "I was there, Ted. Neither the auror nor I did anything untoward ... no matter how much he deserved it. Anyway, that cut the interview short, but we have enough to be sure that Harry Potter is no longer safe at the Dursley residence. Although in their defense, Harry seemed to be fine there this summer until this doxy swarm business. Apparently, an actual attack on their home by magical creatures pushed Vernon over the edge." Her face hardened almost into cruelty. "Not that the Wizengamot will accept that as an excuse when we file charges." She turned to Snape. "I thought the house was supposed to be warded against magical creatures."

"It is," he replied coolly. "You'll notice that none of them got inside to attack the Dursleys. Unfortunately, the wards don't extend to cover the entire grounds, and in any case, they were never intended to protect Potter from outright treachery by his own kin." He thought for a moment. "And come to think of it, I doubt they can block out house elves. There are very few wards that can do so other than those placed on government facilities. The elf who assaulted Potter was named Dobby. Is there any sort of registry of house elf names?" he asked the solicitor.

"None that I'm aware of," said Hestia, "although the number of private families old enough and rich enough to have multiple house elves is fairly small... and overwhelmingly Pureblood."

"Hmm. And while I've been in the homes of many Purebloods who might conceivably bear Harry ill will, I am embarrassed to say that I've never paid attention to the names of any of their servants."

"I know. We're all just trained to ask house elves to carry our bags and fetch the afternoon tea, and then we just forget about them."

"Speak for yourself," muttered Ted. He was, in fact, both fond of and intensely protective of his own house elf.

"Anyway, the boy obviously can't stay where he is regardless of what happens to this Dursley beast," said Ted. "Where are you going to send him?"

"Good question," Hestia responded. "There's an injunction that says he's not going to the Potters against his will, but they still have the power to veto a placement they disapprove of, which probably means no Slytherins. Longbottom Manor is a good possibility, but Augusta and the Heir are out of country and can't be reached."

"Why should the Potters have any say in the matter given the fact that their negligence led to the boy's current state?" asked Snape with a hint of edge to his voice.

"Because we have not yet *legally* demonstrated that they are unfit guardians, and we probably *won't* be able to until I can complete an interview with Vernon Dursley. I'd like to get a memory recording from him and Petunia about what happened so that we don't have to put Harry on the witness stand and turn this whole thing into a media circus, but I can't get in to see Vernon while he's in hospital."

Snape smiled cruelly. "*You* can't, perhaps."

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### ***Two hours later ...***

It had been years since Severus Snape had worn anything but wizarding robes. From an early age, he was eager to abandon his Muggle roots and everything that came with them, and the feeling of robes was part of that effort to escape. But he was still Muggle-raised, and basic Muggle fashion hadn't changed *that* much since his school days. Nevertheless, Snape's students would have been amazed to see the man who walked into Charring Cross Hospital in the early afternoon wearing a black business suit with his hair scrubbed clean and pulled back into a ponytail. Only the most observant of watchers would have noticed how ill at ease the man felt, let alone attribute it to how uncomfortable he was with the odd sensation of wearing trousers for the first time in fifteen years.

Snape first checked with the front desk to find out that Vernon was still in ICU. Then, he placed a Notice-Me-Not Charm on himself and made his way there. It had been years since he'd last seen her, but it was quite possible that Petunia Dursley would recognize him, and Snape didn't want that ... not yet anyway. Near the ICU, he saw the vile woman and her enormous son sitting in a nearby waiting room quietly. He would deal with them later.

Soon, he found the room he was sought. *Room 535 - Vernon Dursley*. Inside, the room was quiet except for the beeping and wheezing of various medical devices. Immediately, he cast a mild Muggle-Repelling Charm on the room to keep the staff from intruding. He did not plan to be here long. Briefly, he examined the chart hanging next to the door, but Muggle medical terminology was beyond him. Not that it mattered. He had his own diagnostic techniques as one did not become a Potions Master without some understanding of healing magic. Several quick spells revealed that Vernon

was sleeping under a mild sedative. His heartbeat was irregular but otherwise strong. While the doxy attack and the subsequent auror interview were both triggering events, it appeared that his heart attack was simply the result of obesity, lack of exercise and, curiously, the long term effects of extreme anxiety and stress. From a pocket of his coat, Snape produced a Calming Draught which he spelled into the IV drop plugged into the man's arm. Then, he pried the Muggle's mouth open and placed a single drop of Veritaserum on his tongue – not enough to compel the truth, as the man's health would not permit it, but enough to make him loose-lipped. Then, after giving the potions a few minutes to do their work, the wizard cast an Ennervate spell on the Muggle, and his eyes fluttered open.

"Who... who are you? You're not a doctor?" said Vernon weakly. Then, he noticed the wand in Snape's hand. "You're one of *them*, aren't you? Come to kill me for revenge? Well, get it over with, but leave my wife and son alone. They had nothing to do with it."

"I am not here to kill you, Vernon Dursley, but simply to find out what happened. Although I *may* consider killing you depending on what I find out." Snape spoke coldly to the man. In truth, he had no immediate plans to kill Vernon, who he thought might presently be more valuable to young Potter alive.

"What is there to ask?" he said in a rasping voice. "The Freak brought those ... *creatures* right up to the door of our house. I've known for years that one day his ... unnaturalness would endanger all our lives. I didn't want to give him the chance to do something even worse to us."

"The boy did not deliberately endanger you, Dursley. Not that I would have thought less of him if he had." Snape

leaned in towards Vernon. "I *know* about the cupboard, Dursley," he hissed at the man.

"You want me to feel guilty? You're wasting your time. I wanted the Freak as far away from my wife and son as possible. If we'd been zoned for it, I'd have built a shed in the back yard so he could stay out there."

"Why keep him at all if you felt such hatred for him?"

"We knew the Potters would never take him back. Why would they? He was a bad one from the start, always staring at us with those green eyes, waiting for his chance to strike. We tried to stamp the magic out of him before it was too late. But still, every day we could see it in him ... growing."

"See what?"

Vernon stared at him intently, almost feverishly, and the beeping of the heart monitor sped up noticeably. "*Evil*," he growled in a hateful whisper. Then, the man closed his eyes, and the beeping slowed. "Anyway, I did what I had to do to protect my family. Kill me if you want. I have nothing more to say."

Snape sneered at him as he raised his wand. "Then I will waste no more time *asking*." Vernon opened his eyes in time to hear Snape snarl the word "**LEGILIMENS!**" And with that, Severus Snape plunged into Vernon Dursley's mind. The intrusion lasted for several minutes before Snape staggered back in shock. He shook his head violently to clear it and then looked at Vernon Dursley anew now that he'd seen things from the Muggle's disturbed perspective. He raised his wand again and cast a Somnium spell before the other man could say anything. Then, he erased the last

few minutes of Vernon Dursley's memories, dispelled the Muggle-Repelling Charm, and left the room.

Seconds later, he entered the family waiting room and cast another Muggle-Repelling Charm to keep anyone else from entering. Petunia stood up angrily at the sight of his wand, while Dudley recoiled from him.

"What is this? Haven't your kind done enough?" Then, she looked at Snape more closely. "*YOU!*" she spat.

"Yes, me. It's been a long time, Petunia. And before you start squawking at me or yelling '*freak*' at the top of your lungs, let me advise against doing either. I am here to find out what's been going on in that hell-house of yours. Do as I say, and I'll be gone inside of five minutes. Resist me and, well, it would be a shame if your husband suffers any sort of ... *relapse*."

Dudley paled at that while Petunia's face registered fear, then anger, and finally resignation. "What do you want me to do?"

"Sit down and look into my eyes," he commanded. "***LEGILIMENS.***" Snape did not spend as much time in Petunia's memories as he had with Vernon now that he knew which memories were the most salient. He *did* make a point of reviewing Petunia's memories of interacting with Lily from the days leading up to Harry's birth to the time he was left with the Dursleys, and he was surprised to see that they matched Lily's description. Snape considered using Legilimency on the boy as well, but decided that he'd learned enough already. Also, he'd found studying the memories of both Vernon and Petunia to be ... profoundly unpleasant, and he thought the boy would likely be the same. As with Vernon, he erased the memory of his



presence from Petunia and Dudley. Then, he left, albeit with even more troubling questions than the ones that had already been answered.

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From the hospital, Snape apparated to Diagon Alley and went straightaway to the offices of Podmore & Associates to inform Artie and Hestia of his findings. Not long after, they contacted Ted Tonks and asked him to Floo to their offices as well. Snape, Ted, Hestia and Artie talked about what Snape had learned from his invasive and slightly illegal assault on the minds of Vernon and Petunia Dursley. Eventually, he poured his observations out into a Pensieve so that they could observe things first hand. After an hour or so, they took a break. Ted went back to the clinic to review some obscure medical books and also write a quick letter for Iris to take to Andromeda.

Meanwhile, Snape quickly made his way through a list of Muggles he'd been putting together for months, as he interviewed doctors, nurses, teachers and various inhabitants of Privet Drive. Then, he went back to Hogwarts to raid the Restricted Section of the Library. Artie went home to his wife, Elizabeth, for a quick dinner, and then told her he'd be working very late that night. His expression was so grim that this time she didn't chide him about the late hours. She knew the look that said "*something bad has happened to one of my clients*" and simply kissed his cheek and promised to have the family's house elf leave a late-night snack for him. Around eight, the four reconvened to discuss their findings and spent several hours doing so. They also went through an entire bottle of Ogden's Finest, though not because it was a happy occasion.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to know what certain characters look like,  
we have pages for them on the [Wikia](#)!

# Mysteries and Revelations

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 3: Mysteries and Revelations

### *9 July 1992*

The next morning, Harry awoke around 10:30 a.m. which was actually quite late for him. After years of cooking breakfast for the Dursleys, Harry would probably always be an early riser. Immediately, there was a soft pop, and a house elf appeared next to his bed, causing him to jump slightly. Unlike Dobby, though, this one seemed quite calm and was wearing a neatly pressed white uniform with a blue caduceus symbol over the heart.

"Good morning, Mr. Harry Potter, sir. Iris hopes that Iris did not startle you. Can Iris bring you some breakfast?" the female elf said cheerfully.

"Um, yes, thank you. Eggs and toast, if you please. Oh, and a glass of pumpkin juice."

"Certainly. And Master Healer Tonks has instructed that you also have a tall glass of milk and a nutrient potion." Iris popped away and returned barely a minute later with breakfast and the potion all on a four-legged serving tray that sat across Harry's lap. There was even a tiny thin vase with a daisy sticking out of it. "Can Iris bring you anything else, Mr. Harry Potter, sir?"

"No, thank you. No, wait! Actually, could I ask you a few questions? About... well, about house elves? I had an

unpleasant encounter with one the other night. I'd heard of house elves but never actually seen one up close. I realize now that I don't know very much about you all."

"Of course not, Mr. Harry Potter, sir. A good house elf is never seen unless needed. Iris will answer your questions if she can, though she knows nothing about the wicked house elf that assaulted Mr. Harry Potter, sir."

"That's okay. I didn't expect you to. Though I don't know how wicked this Dobby bloke actually is. He did try to warn me that my life was in danger."

"Perhaps. But he also *put* your life in danger by delaying you at the gate of the house of the bad Dursleys. Had he not intervened or simply waited until you were in your room to talk with you, you would likely have been safe from the nasty doxies."

"How do you know all that?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Iris heard Mr. Harry Potter say what happened yesterday morning, sir."

"You weren't here when I told Ted and the others what happened," Harry said with just a hint of suspicion.

Iris smiled. "A *good* house elf is always close at hand, Mr. Harry Potter sir."

"Hmm. So why do you think Dobby was *wicked*, Iris?"

"Iris thinks Dobby Elf is at odds with his master or mistress. A good house elf is a reflection of its owner. If a house elf's owner is wicked, then a good house elf must try to heal him of his wickedness. Sometimes, such healing is not possible, in which case the house elf may become an extension of the

owner's wickedness, but that is simply the way of house elves. But a *bad* house elf will sometimes set himself at odds with a wicked master, will seek to become free elf. And a free elf is not a good house elf *at all*, sir. In time, even with best of motives, a free elf may become the wickedest elf of all. He risks becoming ... a *wild* elf."

"And what is that?"

Iris shuddered. "Please forgive Iris, Mr. Harry Potter sir, but house elves do not like to think upon such things. It is ... unhealthy."

"Oh, I'm sorry, then. But can you at least tell me how house elves came to work for wizards? Was it by agreement? Or were you enslaved somehow?"

She smiled. "A slave is an unwilling servant. Only the wickedest house elves are unwilling servants. To be a house elf *is* to serve. It is what house elves are – what house elves were all born to do."

Harry blinked a few times. "But it can't have always been that way. Either there was a time when there were wizards but no house elves to serve them or house elves but with no wizards to serve. Right?"

"Ah. You speak of the Time Before. House elves do not speak of such things, for such matters are upsetting to wizards."

"Upsetting?" Harry asked gently. He was worried about somehow disrespecting or even frightening Iris, but she merely smiled.

"When wizards know how house elves came to be, it upsets them and makes them unhappy, so we do not talk of it. It

reminds them of the Time Before because it was during the Time Before that house elves came to be."

"The Time Before?"

"Those days before wizards and witches bound Magic to their will. Those days when magic burned like the raging inferno and swelled like the stormy seas. Wizards are rightly proud of how they bound Magic to their will and do not like to be reminded of when it was free to do as it wanted. "

"Do you mean that wizards don't like to know about how house elves ... came into existence, so they ordered you never to repeat it?"

Iris laughed. "Oh no, Mr. Harry Potter sir. No wizard ever gave the order. But the house elves saw how it distressed the wizards, so the house elves resolved never to speak of it. The best servants always anticipate their masters' needs."

"Would you speak of it if a wizard asked you?"

"Only if it were the *right* wizard," she said almost mischievously.

From her response, Harry assumed that wasn't him. He decided to change the subject. "Forgive me, Iris. Please don't take this the wrong way, but ... you're very well spoken for a house elf from what little I know."

"Iris takes no offense, Mr. Harry Potter sir. Master Healer Tonks and Mistress Healer Tonks are good owners. They wish for Iris to speak properly to reflect well upon them before their patients. Also, Iris assists Master Healer Tonks and Mistress Healer Tonks with their healing arts for which

precision of speech is often important. And so Iris, being a good house elf, complies with their needs."

"But not to the point of using any first person pronouns, though," he said with a smile. "You still say 'Iris' instead of 'I.' Why is that?"

The elf nodded at that. "'Iris' is the name given to me by my masters. To a house elf, a name is a gift offered to define the nature of our service. A house elf has no identity of its own beyond its name, nor does it need one. Now, eat up, Mr. Harry Potter sir, so you can finish getting well." She bowed to him and then popped away. Harry shrugged and ate his breakfast.

Half an hour later, Ted came in. Outwardly, he looked as jovial as the day before, but Harry thought he sensed an undercurrent of ... something. After a bit of small talk, Ted performed the same wand examination he did before and pronounced Harry completely clean of doxy venom. Then, "just to be on the safe side," he performed a second and much more complicated diagnostic spell. He frowned at the results.

"Is there a problem?" Harry asked.

"No, nothing showed up," Ted replied.

"You seem ... unhappy about that. Were you expecting something to show up?"

"Honestly, I wasn't sure. But hold off on the questions about that. I think Snape and the others should be present for that conversation. They're waiting downstairs."

Ted called out for Iris, and the diminutive nurse popped back into the room. "Iris, dear, fetch the clothes that Miss

Jones brought for Harry. Harry, when you're dressed, come on downstairs. We'll be waiting in the first room on the left at the base of the stairs." He smiled again, but Harry felt that he was definitely worried about something, which only made the boy start to worry as well. Seconds later, Iris returned with some of his casual clothes and a pair of trainers, and the boy quickly dressed. He checked himself out in the mirror and was dismayed by the state of his hair but otherwise thought he looked fine. Minutes later, the boy entered a small parlor where Ted, Hestia, Artie and Professor Snape were already sitting. Harry took his seat and looked at the others expectantly. Snape spoke first.

"Mr. Potter, we are here today to discuss your future living arrangements, as well as to decide how you wish to proceed against the Dursleys for their treatment of you and, by extension, how you wish to proceed against the Potters who were responsible for your placement with them. But first, I wish to advise you of the results of my own investigation. Yesterday afternoon, I visited both Vernon and Petunia Dursley and used Legilimency against them in an attempt to learn the reasons for their conduct towards you."

Harry scoffed. "What *reasons* were you expecting, sir? They hate me. That's all there is to it."

Snape looked oddly pained at that, as if he had unpleasant news that he did not wish to share but felt obligated to do so anyway. "Mr. Potter ... the Dursley's do not *hate* you *per se*." Harry started to interrupt, but Snape put up his hand and continued. "Allow me to finish, Mr. Potter. It would be more ... accurate to say that the Dursleys are ... *afraid* of you. More than afraid, actually. They are all three irrationally, pathologically *terrified* of you. In the first months after your placement, the Dursleys kept you in the same nursery as Dudley. Petunia and Vernon only moved



you to the downstairs cupboard because they each independently came to the deeply held conclusion that you would somehow harm their son if you were kept anywhere near him even though you yourself were but an infant at the time. Their subsequent efforts to, as Vernon said, '*stamp the magic*' out of you were driven by this fear which manifested within them both as a lengthy series of extremely disturbing and nightmarish fantasies developed over the course of a decade which demonstrated to them both how you would..." He hesitated and then took a deep breath. "How you would torture and kill them through magical means if you ever came into your wizarding heritage. Even without magic, however, they still remained utterly convinced of your intent to harm them through mundane means, as well as their own powerlessness to prevent you from doing so save through actively trying to crush your spirit."

Harry was dumbstruck at this announcement, and so Snape continued.

"To give but one example, there was an incident from when you were six or so when you spilled bacon grease on Vernon and in response he broke your arm. In *his* memories, you deliberately attempted to throw hot grease onto him with the intention of burning his face and possibly blinding him, and it was only his quick reactions that saved him from serious injury. The broken arm was the result of self-defense."

"THAT'S A LIE!" Harry said furiously. "It was an *accident*! And he wasn't even hurt!"

Snape raised his hands again to placate the boy.

"I *know* that, Mr. Potter. With Occlumency, I was able to review those images clearly with all emotional context removed, and it was obviously as you say – a simple minor

accident to which Vernon Dursley grotesquely overreacted. *But* when I reviewed the same memories *without* blocking the Muggle's emotional responses, I was nearly overwhelmed by the terror he experienced from what he genuinely believed to be an attempt by you to seriously harm or even disfigure him. In all my years as a Legilimens, I have never encountered any phenomenon quite like this. The only comparable effect I can think of would be when the memories of someone placed under a very sophisticated Confundus Curse are altered due to the subject's desire to rationalize his own Confunded actions. However, this effect, whatever its origins or nature, is much more potent and persistent than any Confundus I have ever encountered."

Harry fought to calm himself and to consider what Snape was saying, but a few months of Occlumency training were nothing against the fury he felt now. "Do you mean to say ... someone *cursed* the Dursleys and that's why they treated me that way all these years?" Then, his face darkened as he abandoned completely his efforts to control his growing anger. "Was it the Potters?" he spat. "It wasn't enough to dump me off with Muggles - they had to curse those Muggles to fear and hate me?"

"Harry," said Artie gently. "It's not just the Dursleys."

Harry froze as Artie's words sank in. Artie looked over at Snape who nodded at him. Then, he continued. "Professor Snape also interviewed several of your teachers, your neighbors and even some of the doctors and nurses who remembered you from when you were injured by the Dursleys and taken to hospital. Understand, these are all people who would have seen and noticed your appearance, and with it, the obvious signs of neglect. The teachers and medical personnel were, in fact, required by Muggle law to

report any of the abuse signs you clearly showed to Muggle law enforcement. None of them did."

"I ... I assumed that the Dursleys bullied them out of saying anything."

"Harry, your uncle is a mid-level executive at a Muggle drill manufacturing company, and not even in the main office," said Hestia. "Your aunt is a stay-at-home mom. Neither of them has the sort of standing to bully a teacher into ignoring child abuse, let alone a doctor or nurse. All of the people Professor Snape examined *knew* that you were likely being mistreated. Originally, Severus feared that someone might have Obliviated them all for some reason connected with your placement with the Muggles. But the truth is ... all of them remember you clearly but actively *chose not* to get intervene because," the witch hesitated, as if grasping for a kind way to say it before realizing there wasn't one, "because something about *you* made them recoil in fear and hatred."

Desperate to deny it, Harry tried to summon up a single memory of a Muggle who had ever treated him well. "There was a neighbor across the street. Mrs. Figg. She was always fairly nice to me."

"She's a squib, Harry," said Artie. "Arabella Figg was placed there by James and Lily Potter to look out for you. As a squib, she may not have been fully affected. And even she never informed the Potters of how you were being treated, although in her defense she likely did not fully realize the extent of your mistreatment."

Harry struggled to comprehend what all this meant. In his mind, he tried to review every interaction with a Muggle that he'd ever had. Then, he remembered his brief phone

conversation with Hermione's mother the previous week... and how surprisingly cold she'd been. This from a woman he'd met exactly once and talked to for less than thirty seconds. He rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as he fought to regain his self-control. "*I've never met a grown-up who did anything to help me in any way,*" he'd told Snape the previous year. And now he knew why.

"What's causing this?" he asked in a quiet voice. "What's been done to me?"

"Well," said Ted. "I've performed the most thorough diagnostic spells I know, and I can't find any sign of a curse or any other dark magic. The only way to find out anything more than we already have is to go to St. Mungo's ... which carries its own drawbacks."

"Such as?" Harry asked tightly.

"Well, first of all, the healers there would almost certainly insist on informing the Potters of anything they find. Second, if the top healers there *don't* immediately find a cause and a cure – and I'm not confident they will – they'll want to keep running tests until they *do* find it, which might mean keeping you out of school. Finally, well," he hesitated for a moment, "St. Mungo's is Ministry-run, and I'm afraid this might be sufficiently weird enough for the Unspeakables to be called in. A wizard who provokes an automatic fight-or-flight response in nearly any Muggle who interacts with him for any extended period would probably represent some kind of threat to the Statute of Secrecy. Your solicitors are bound to confidentiality as am I, but the St. Mungo's healers would be less so."

"So no St. Mungo's then. And I *suppose*," he said sarcastically, "it also means we don't even prosecute the

Dursleys because it will raise questions about me that we don't have answers for." He closed his eyes and went through another quick calming routine before the thought of Vernon walking away scot-free caused him to snap. Then, he looked up at his mentor. "Do you have any thoughts, Professor Snape?"

The man was silent for a moment before he responded. "Mr. Potter, I am, all modesty aside, an *expert* on the Dark Arts. I am more qualified to serve as DADA instructor than anyone who has held that post in at least twenty years. The only reason I never pursued a Mastery in Dark Arts Defense is that doing so would require me to reveal to the Ministry how many illegal curses and hexes I know, as well as how many I have *invented* that are not publicly known." He paused and then shook his head. "And I ... have *never heard of anything remotely like this*. It is a mystery and a deeply troubling one, and we must be absolutely cautious as we seek to unravel it. In any case, whatever the source of this malady, it seems to only affect Muggles. While your fellow students and teachers treated you with contempt throughout your childhood, you are presently one of the most popular students in your year, and all of your professors praise you without exception."

"The Potters aren't very fond of me," Harry said ruefully.

"James Potter hates everything connected with Slytherin House, a view which predates your birth by at least a decade. His son's views are nothing but a reflection of the father's. Lily Potter's views are ... more complicated, but it is not my place to explain them."

Harry started to ask Snape about that, but the man's expression made it plain that questions about Lily Potter would not be entertained. "Fine. So I can't stay with

Muggles. Not a problem. Augusta Longbottom offered me sanctuary last Christmas. Can't I go there?"

"In time. Unfortunately, Lady Augusta and her grandson are abroad and incommunicado for another week. Until then, we need a wizarding household with sufficient warding to protect you against whomever sent the doxy swarm after you. But it must also be one to which James Potter cannot lodge a credible objection since he still remains your Head of House." Snape hesitated. "I am assuming, of course, that you do not wish to petition the Potters to allow you to move back in with them for the duration."

Harry closed his eyes as he thought through the ramifications of that idea, particularly in light of what he'd just learned. Honestly, the thought of living under the Potter roof right now filled him with equal parts fury and dread. "That assumption would be correct, sir," he said quietly.

"And for a variety of hyper-technical ethics issues that would only bore you," said Artie, "you can't just stay with Hestia or with me and Elizabeth or even with the Tonkses. So who does that leave us with?"

"I have one thought," said Snape. "One household that meets our particular needs and to which James Potter would not object."

Later that afternoon after the arrangements were all made, Snape apparated himself and Harry, along with the boy's shrunken possessions, to a hideously misshapen multi-story farmhouse in Ottery St. Catchpole. Next to the pathway that led to it was a battered, hand-carved sign that simply said "The Burrow." Harry regarded the tottering dwelling before him and then turned to his teacher.

"You have *got* to be joking."

## Chapter End Notes

RE: The Dursleys. The most important thing you need to know about me and the Dursleys is that I hate them. I don't mean I hate them for how badly they treat Harry. I mean I hate them as a concept. It is a standard trope that the protagonist in British children's literature is a poor mistreated orphan whose crapsack life finally changes for the better after he pulls the sword out of the stone or she finds out that she's really princess or he crushes his evil abusive relatives to death with a gigantic peach. The "Harry Potter" series is the only one I can think of which has this trope ... and ends every book but the last one with the child being sent back to his abusive relatives for his own good. It is also one of the few I can think of in which the abused protagonist implicitly fits into a setting in which Child Protective Services both exists and is handwaved away. (At least the Lemony Snicket "Series of Unfortunate Events" books rely on the conceit that everyone except the kids is too dumb to recognize Count Olaf while he's in disguise.) Frankly, I didn't want to do "the Dursleys are cartoonishly evil" and I didn't want to do "the Potters and/or Dumbledore are running around Obliviating CPS workers in order to keep Harry at the Dursleys because they too are cartoonishly evil" because both those themes bore me senseless. And I am convinced that the #1 reason for the "Dumbledore is evil" trope is that scene between Harry and Dumbledore in his office after Sirius's death where the old man gives the infamous "not as well-fed or as happy as I'd have liked" speech basically admitting that he knew how Harry was being treated and did nothing about it. I think that marks the exact moment when fans of the series started combing back through the first four books looking for signs that

Dumbledore is not just incompetent but actively evil. And I DON'T want to do an evil Dumbledore story.

Well, not now anyway. I actually have an evil Dumbledore story that I had started but put on hold to work on this epic tale. Maybe I'll get back to it before the end of the decades. But I digress.

For the purposes of this story, the Dursleys were a pompous and obnoxious pair of social climbers who reluctantly agreed to raise the squib Harry Potter in exchange for financial compensation and a free house from James and Lily. And they raised Harry properly ... for a few months. Then, they went STARK RAVING NUTS, became convinced that Harry was some sort of demon-child, and responded as we've seen. And every single Muggle who interacted with Harry tacitly went along with it. And sometimes not even tacitly - we never did find out what that one teacher did to Harry that was so awful that he turned her hair blue with accidental magic.

So what is causing this phenomenon? Shhh. Spoilers. As for the Dursleys, you've seen the last of them for a while. I can envision a scene in which Harry confronts the Dursleys again, but I don't expect it before the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Possibly Lily and James will look in on them before then but not during anything I've outlined for the immediate future. Cheers.



# Meet the Weasleys (Pt 1)

## CHAPTER 4: Meet the Weasleys. (Pt 1)

***9 July 1992***

"You have *got* to be joking," said Harry as he surveyed the majestic wreck that was the Weasley Burrow.

"Of course, Mr. Potter," drawled Snape. "I am, after all, known across the length and breadth of Magical Britain for my comedic stylings. Now come along." With that, Snape started down the pathway towards the house.

Harry followed, ignoring the man's sarcasm. "And I'll really be safer here than, say, a wooden crate in the alleyway back behind the Leaky Cauldron?"

"Despite its ... *eccentric* design, you will find that the Burrow's protections are much more potent than they would appear. The eldest Weasley son, William, is an accomplished curse-breaker for Gringotts, and he has installed state-of-the-art wards of his own design. Which reminds me: You should probably consult with your tutors and add magical sensory training to your tutoring schedule. Had you taken time to develop magical awareness – admittedly something usually well beyond the First Year curriculum – you might have noticed that we have already passed through three layers of wards powerful enough to incapacitate us both were we not already keyed into them. You will also be pleased to know that the Burrow's wards, according to Arthur Weasley, include one which blocks uninvited house elves from entering the grounds. The house also has a Floo connection, so you will be able to resume your tutoring schedule tomorrow by traveling directly to

the Leaky Cauldron. However, your next Occlumency session has been pushed back a week due to your time spent recuperating. Finally, the grounds are large enough to accommodate a full-sized Quidditch pitch. Mr. Flint is quite eager to see what you can do in tryouts this September, and since the Weasley Terrors are also the Gryffindor Beaters, I expect you to return with at least some facility at dodging them."

Harry glanced up at his mentor with a measure of surprise. Snape merely looked down his nose at the boy. "I have grown ... accustomed to that trophy sitting in my office, Potter."

"To be honest, sir, I would never have pegged you for a Quidditch fan."

"I'm not. It's a ridiculous and insipid game made worse by the fact that our national obsession with it ensures that out of a student body of nearly 300, only twenty-eight students per year can participate in any organized sport." He sneered. "That does not prevent me, however, from taking pleasure out of *winning* at that insipid game."

"Particularly in light of my father's notorious skill at it?" Harry asked mildly.

"*Particularly.*"

"Mm-hmm. Out of curiosity, sir, do *you* have a favorite sport?"

"Duelling, though the Headmaster has declined my requests to restart the old dueling club which was discontinued during the later days of the War. His understandable concern is that in light of my personal reputation and background only Slytherin Purebloods

would sign up for it, and he is loathe to allow potential future Death Eaters to receive combat training under the school's auspices. As a child, I enjoyed soccer during the summers but never at Hogwarts. It would have been unthinkable for a Slytherin in those days to have professed a fondness for any Muggle sport, even the most popular one on Earth. That said, I do recall that when I first started at Hogwarts, there was a brief fad for cricket which even attracted Purebloods. Lucius Malfoy had organized a student cricket league which was still active during my first year, but it fell apart after he graduated."

"Lucius Malfoy is a cricket fan?!" asked Harry in disbelief.

"At seventeen, Lucius Malfoy was not yet caught up in the Dark Lord's orbit and was rather more open-minded about such things, much to the disappointment of his odious father, Abraxas Malfoy. Though to be completely honest, I always suspected he liked cricket simply because he thought the uniforms made him look dashing."

By that point, the two had made their way up to the front door of the house. Snape turned to his charge. "It goes without saying, Mr. Potter, that you are a guest in the Weasley home. You have skillfully cultivated a reputation for charm and bonhomie and for rejecting the snobbery and bigotries with which our house is regrettably associated. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley - and please note, *Mrs.* rather than *Madame Weasley* - will refuse any offer of financial compensation for allowing you to stay with them, so I would recommend you seize any opportunity to help their children with the chores. It will likely not be remotely as demanding as the labors piled upon you in your previous living arrangements. In any event, do nothing to embarrass Slytherin House during your time here."

Harry sighed in exasperation. "I'm not stupid, sir. And I'm not Draco Malfoy. But I repeat myself, I suppose. Anyway, I promise I'll be as charming as possible ... and I also promise to look up '*bonhomie*' in the dictionary as soon as possible and do that too. *But* if they stick me with Ron Weasley in a room that's solid crimson and gold and plastered with Chudley Cannons posters, I can make no promises."

"Naturally, Potter. I would never ask the impossible of any of my students."

With that, Snape rapped sharply on the front door. Seconds later, it was opened by a cheerful middle-aged woman with flaming red hair who practically exemplified the word "motherly." Molly Weasley introduced herself warmly to Harry, invited both them inside, and asked the Professor if he would care "for a cuppa." Snape demurred politely. Instead, he reached into a pocket and produced a small box which, with a tap from his wand, instantly resized itself into Harry's trunk. While Snape and Molly made small talk, there was a rumbling from upstairs, and then Fred and George bounded down into the living room and over to Harry like two massive, overly affectionate ginger puppies.

"Harry Potter!" "Our ickle snakey friend!" "Welcome to the Burrow!" "The most exciting place on Earth!" "If you like de-gnoming gardens, that is!" Then, the two laughed as Harry tried to decipher their back-and-forth speech. Coming down the stairs behind him were two more figures: Ron, who didn't seem at all happy about Harry's presence, and the little girl he'd seen the year before at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters looking dewy-eyed at Jim.

"*Boys!* Stop that foolishness at once! We have company here!" Molly gestured towards Snape, who looked at the

Twins with a jaundiced eye. The two swallowed in unison. The Potions Master turned back to Molly.

"Mrs. Weasley, I leave Mr. Potter to your ministrations. On behalf of my House and Hogwarts, I thank you once again for giving the young man a place to stay for the next week."

"Oh, we're delighted to have the young man stay here. I've heard such great things about him from Percy and the Twins. And of course, the Headmaster told us all about how he helped to save our Ron from that awful Professor Quirrell."

Harry schooled his face into a bland mask at the mention of Quirrell. He wondered if Molly Weasley knew that Quirrell was actually both an agent and a host for Voldemort. He also wondered why Ron was giving him such a stink-eye over Molly's statement.

"I was happy to help, Mrs. Weasley. I'm just glad to know that Slytherins and Gryffindors can work together when it's for the Greater Good." He smiled over at Ron who continued to glare at him even as Molly praised Harry for his modesty. Then, she noticed that the girl had come down.

"Oh, Professor Snape, before you leave – I wanted our Ginny to have a chance to say hello. She'll be starting Hogwarts in September. Ginny, this is Professor Severus Snape. He'll be your Potions teacher."

The shy girl stepped forward and curtsied somewhat nervously.

"Good afternoon, Miss Weasley. I look forward to having you in my class room. I have every confidence that you will follow in the illustrious footsteps of your brothers William, Charles and Percival." The Twins were openly amused by

their omission from the list of "illustrious" Weasleys. Ron, not so much. After a few more moments of chitchat (during which the Potions Master struggled not to show visible boredom), Snape gave Molly a schedule for Harry's tutoring and insisted on reimbursing her for the cost of Floo powder. Then, he said his goodbyes and exited quickly to Harry's private amusement. Although Harry was better at hiding it, he was slightly uncomfortable with the overbearing ... *cheerfulness* of the Burrow and was sure Snape felt even more so.

"Now then, boys, you show Harry upstairs," said Molly to her three sons. "He'll be staying in Charlie's room, since *he's* made it clear he won't be home this summer." That last comment was surprisingly arch, and Harry briefly wondered what sort of family drama he'd wandered into. The other three boys did not react to Molly's comment and led Harry upstairs. Mercifully, Charlie's room was not done up in Gryffindor colors, but it was covered in Quidditch posters, mainly Puddlemere United and the Tutshill Tornados (which Harry thought were much more sensible choices than Ron's odd Chudley obsession). There were also an unusual number of pictures of dragons on the wall and nearly as many dragon models painstakingly painted and then hung from the ceiling with string. Harry put his trunk off to one side and sat down on the bed. It felt quite comfy. Then he looked up and noticed that Fred and George had followed him into the room.

"Well, we hope you like it here, Harrikins." "It'll be an interesting week with a guest." "Particularly one that sets Ronnikin's teeth on edge the way you do." Then, the two boys laughed together. It was mildly unnerving, but Harry supposed he'd get used to it.

"So I take it Ron wasn't happy with me coming here?" he asked.

"Ron's been in a foul mood almost since we got off the train." "Dunno why." "We reckon it has something to do." "With whatever happened at the end of school."

"Has he not told you?" Harry asked in surprise. "For that matter, has no one else? I assumed it would be all over the school."

"Just the broad details." "Quirrell went bad and tried to steal something from Dumbledore." "Jim stopped him, with various Lions and Snakes along for the ride." "We've heard that you saved Jim's life." "We've heard you were secretly in cahoots with Quirrell against Jim." "We've heard that you and Jim are secretly the same person pretending to be both a Gryffindor and a Slytherin as part of some mysterious plot." *Pause.* "Admittedly, that last one came someone who was too dense to notice that both of you share classes and eat all your meals in the same room." "Too dense or too paranoid. I think Time-Turners were mentioned." "So anyway, what did happen?"

Harry filed the word "Time-Turner" away for future research. "As you said: Quirrell went bad and tried to steal something from Dumbledore. He captured Ron, Jim, Hermione and Neville. Blaise, Theo and I helped them escape, and then Jim killed Quirrell by doing a Boy-Who-Lived thingy." He decided to leave out all references to Voldemort. Ron could fill in that bit if he chose.

The Twins looked at each other for a second. "So, would you have gone to help..." "If Hermione and Neville hadn't been there?"

"Beg pardon?"

The one with the mole sighed and finally spoke for the pair. "If it had just been Ron, would you have risked your life to save him?"

Harry opened his mouth, closed it, and then looked away as he considered the unexpected question. "*Would I have done all that for just Ron?*" The Slytherin side of him recoiled from the idea of heroic self-sacrifice, but as Snape was wont to remind him, he did have a powerful Gryffindor side.

"I'm not sure. I *think* so. Maybe not with quite the same urgency, and I don't know if Blaise and Theo would have come along. But yes, I'm pretty sure I'd have at least tried to rescue Ron. Now Jim? I don't know. He *is* a spectacular git. But Ron, I think, is just a guy caught up in his hero-worship and irrational Slytherin-hatred. I am *at least* 65% sure I would have gone to rescue him if he'd been in danger even though we're not what I'd call friends. Or even people who like one another. Does that answer your question?"

Mole and Non-Mole looked at one another, nodded and smiled at Harry. "Yeah. And just to let you know - you won't need to pay us anything else starting this fall." "You risk your life to save our little brother?" "You get put on the safe list." "Which means you'll only get pranked if we do something that affects your whole house..." "In which case you probably wouldn't want to be the one who sticks out for *not* getting pranked." "You can tell Zabini and Nott that goes for them too." "Just don't spread it around." "We don't want anyone to even know there *is* a safe list."

Harry smiled. "Got it. And thanks. And for what it's worth, even if you don't want a weekly payment, I'm still interested in financing any ... special projects you have in mind."



The Twins smiled predatorily, and Harry wondered what fresh Hell he'd unleashed on Hogwarts.

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Late afternoon found the four boys plus Percy out in the vegetable garden, where Harry was introduced to the fine old Weasley tradition of de-gnoming, which involved catching the diminutive little humanoids by the hair, whirling them about as fast as possible, and then flinging them over the garden wall. Apparently, it was a game the Weasley boys liked to play with a point system based on distance and "style." Harry struggled to conceal how appalling the whole thing was until finally one of the little creatures actually spoke with a loud "Giroff!" when he grabbed hold of it.

"Gah!" Harry said as he dropped the gnome. He looked to the other Weasleys who were all staring at him. "So, um, these things we're flinging about. Are they, y'know ... sentient?"

"Pfft! Gnome-lover," muttered Ron. The twins giggled at that, but Percy gave the other three a dirty look before actually answering Harry's inquiry.

"I'm pleased to hear you ask that, Harry, so that I'm not the *only* person to ever de-gnome this garden who actually had any ethical concerns for the little pests. When I was a First Year, I asked Professor Kettleburn that very question about garden gnomes. His response was illuminating. The prevailing theory is that gnomes represent an early attempt by ancient wizards to create a servant race to handle menial tasks. This was thousands of years ago, long before the time of Merlin or Hogwarts, so no one knows exactly how they were created, but the results were obviously unsatisfactory. They are drawn to wizarding gardens

because they were originally created to serve as gardeners, but they're not really smart enough to do that job effectively. All they know to do is dig up vegetables and other plants regardless of whether they're ready for harvest or not and then leave them strewn about. And to answer your actual question, while a rare few are smart enough to mimic random words and phrases, they're basically gophers in the bodies of tiny misshapen humans."

"Ah, Perfect Prefect Percy." "What would we do without your brilliant elucidation?"

"You actually know what '*elucidation*' means?" asked Harry in an mock-astonished voice. "Incredible!"

Percy, who was about to become annoyed with the Twins, looked at him in surprise and then smiled. He rarely found himself in the company of anyone was capable of diverting the Twins when they started picking on him or who would even bother trying.

"Anyway," continued Harry. "Be that as it may, is gnome-flinging really the best way to deal with them?"

"More or less," said Percy. "All things considered, it's surprisingly humane. Their bodies are so durable that they don't really take any damage from being hurled a great distance. And they're so dumb that if you fling them far enough they won't be able to find their way back to your garden for quite some time. Certainly, it's better than spraying them with gnomicide."

Percy did not mention that gnome-flinging was a time-consuming but reasonably enjoyable pastime. Other than Bill, he was the only Weasley child who had realized that the Burrow was actually warded against gnomes during the school year and that their parents deactivated that ward

during the summers to give their more rambunctious sons something to keep them occupied for several days a week. Who *knew* what the Twins would get into if they didn't have to spend three afternoons a week on gnome patrol?

Meanwhile, Harry had a brief image of pitiful gnomes choking to death under a cloud of poisonous gas and shuddered. "I suppose it is. So they were created as servants? Sort of like the house elves?"

"Yes. According to Professor Kettleburn, there were a lot of ancient attempts at creating magical servants. Gnomes, gargoyles, pixies, doxies, and others." Harry stiffened involuntarily at the mention of those vicious little doxies and the suggestion that some foolish wizard created the first ones. "Then, somebody created the house elves and that was as far as research into that area went. I guess ancient wizards decided that they didn't want servants more capable than house elves. Probably wise."

"Yeah, probably so," said Harry quietly, as he thought back to Iris's cryptic remarks about "the Time Before" and the danger of elves going "wild." Between Dobby and Iris, he wasn't sure what to think about house elves, but he could certainly see the wisdom in not creating any servants even *more* powerful and intelligent than those creatures.

"Wow, Perfect Prefect Percy." "Is there any area into which." "Your genius does not extend?"

Percy made a face of long-suffering annoyance. Harry merely looked at the Twins in apparent confusion.

"Here's what I don't understand, Percy. Given the inherent benefits of the position of prefect, why haven't the Twins at least *considered* trying to get it themselves? They're the smartest blokes in their year, no matter how hard they work

to hide it. And a *truly cunning* mischief-maker could wreak some real chaos if he could hide behind a prefect's badge."

The Twins looked at him as if that were the silliest thing they'd ever heard, but then they both blinked for a second in unison, and Harry could practically see the wheels turning in their heads.

"Harry Potter!" exclaimed Percy hotly. "You are a *guest* in the Weasley household. I'll thank you to use your Slytherin powers for good rather than evil while you stay here. *Do not* encourage my brothers to abuse the prefect system as another avenue for their nonsense." The older boy tried his best to give Harry a stern look, but he could tell that Percy was struggling not to snicker at Harry's reverse psychology. For his part, Harry's face betrayed nothing but serene innocence.

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After a few hours spent de-gnoming, Harry and the Weasley boys went into the house to wash up before dinner. As Harry came down the stairs, there was a burst of green flame from the fireplace as Arthur Weasley stepped through, dusting off Floo powder as he did.

"Hello, Weasleys!" exclaimed the man jovially. Then, he noticed Harry. "Ah, and hello to you as well! Mr. Potter, I presume!"

"Please, Mr. Weasley, call me Harry." He stepped forward and gave the man a firm but respectful handshake which the man returned with a smile.

"I trust you're settling in alright, Harry?"

"Oh, yes sir. Your family has been most gracious. I got to fling gnomes this afternoon! It was wicked!" Actually, it was

merely a mildly enjoyable leisure activity, but apparently it was a Weasley family tradition, so Harry feigned what he thought was an acceptable level of delight.

"Haha! I'm glad to see your fitting right in. I remember long afternoons of gnome-flinging myself. But all work and no play makes Jack a dull lad. I'm sure the boys will have you out on the Quidditch pitch tomorrow for a few rounds."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Now then, Harry, from what Professor Snape mentioned in his owl, you grew up Muggle-raised, am I right?" Surprised by the question, Harry simply nodded. "If you don't mind, could I ask you some questions about what it was like?"

Harry gaped at that. He didn't think that Snape had told the Weasleys *everything* about what happened at 4 Privet Drive, but surely Mr. Weasley knew that he hadn't been treated well there. Did this strange man have some prurient interest in how the Dursleys had raised him? "In what sense, sir?" he asked evasively.

"Well, for starters, what's it like to have a house with ekeltricity?" Arthur asked, oblivious to the boy's confusion.

"Ekel ... tricity?" Harry said slowly. "Do you... perhaps ... mean *electricity*, sir?"

"Do I? Is that how you say it? Blimey!" And with that, the man pulled out a worn pocket-sized spiral notebook from one pocket and then a Muggle-style Biro ink pen from another. "Could you spell that for me?"

Harry dutifully did so as Mr. Weasley copied down the information. Privately Harry thought that this might well be the most surreal moment he'd experienced since ... well,

since he'd gone gnome-flinging earlier that day. Their brief conversation was suddenly interrupted by a shriek from the kitchen from Molly.

"*ARTHUR WEASLEY!* That boy is our guest! Do *NOT* badger him with silly questions about batteries and rubber duckies and other such Muggle nonsense! Now go get cleaned up! Supper's nearly done!"

Arthur sighed. "Yes, Mollywobbles." He smiled at the boy and mouthed "*We'll talk later*" before heading upstairs to wash up.

"*Rubber duckies?!*" thought Harry, as he mentally recalibrated his standard for what constituted surrealism among wizards.

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Dinner was an enjoyable affair, and Molly Weasley was an excellent home cook. Afterwards, the family and Harry spent time listening to the Wizarding Wireless, playing chess and other games – Mr. and Mrs. Weasley taught Harry to play cribbage, and over the course of a game, he explained as best he could the true purpose of rubber duckies. Arthur Weasley was visibly disappointed to learn that they were merely children's toys designed to make bath time more enjoyable. Apparently, he and some of his Mugglephile coworkers were convinced that the things had some kind of deep religious significance. He also briefly took Harry outside to see his pride and joy: a 1966 Ford Anglia 105E Deluxe. According to Mr. Weasley, Expansion Charms allowed it to carry the whole family comfortably. Also, it could both fly and turn invisible, although apparently not both at the same time. After proudly announcing that fact to an amazed Harry, Mr. Weasley suddenly blushed and then asked the boy to please not tell

"Mollywobbles" about that last bit, as she was apparently unaware of the nature of his "special modifications."

At ten, the family went to bed, though unwillingly on the part of Ron and the Twins. As Harry followed the Weasley children up the stairs, something caught Harry's attention. The third step from the top of the landing nearest Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's room squeaked – loudly. Both Percy and Ron stepped on the offending step without even thinking about it, while the Twins stepped over it, also without seeming to think about it as if they'd had years of practice avoiding it. What really caught Harry's attention, though, was that Ginny *also* avoided the offending step. After a second of hesitation, Harry deliberately made a point of stepping on the squeaky board and noted both its noise and its position.

Around 2 a.m., Harry awoke with a gasp from a vivid nightmare involving Vernon Dursley's cheerful smile and the sensation of a dozen chittering doxies crawling up his back. He sat up in bed, grateful that one of the benefits of his Occlumency exercises was that he no longer cried out after nightmares. Though to be fair, he rarely cried out from nightmares before "The Doxy Incident" – that was one habit the Dursleys had quite literally beaten out of him at a very early age. Just as he was about to lie back down, he heard a faint sound from outside. Peering out the window into the moonless night, Harry could just barely make out the form of Ginny Weasley in nightgown and robe as she crept towards the family's private Quidditch pitch. Curious, Harry went to his trunk and pulled out his omnoculars. With them, he was able to watch Ginny as she deftly picked the lock on the shed with what looked like a hair pin. Then, she pulled out a broom (belonging to one of her brothers, he assumed) along with a Golden Snitch. She then spent the better part of two hours running basic Seeker drills, and very successfully from what Harry knew of the game. It was

obvious that the young girl was quite skilled at flying, particularly considering that she was most likely self-taught, and she showed a clear understanding of the standard Seeker training regimen. After her impromptu training session ended, Harry watched as Ginny returned the broom and Snitch to the shed, which she relocked without difficulty.

Harry smiled and then went downstairs, careful to avoid the squeaky step. When Ginny made her way up to the back door of the house, she was startled to see Harry waiting just outside the door with two glasses of water. "I've read that it's important to rehydrate after a training session," he said with a smirk.

She froze and then looked at him angrily. "How much did you see?"

"Everything from the lock-picking on. Good technique, by the way. Did the Twins teach you to pick locks?"

"No! They just left a book on the topic hidden in *my* room because they didn't want Mom to find it!" She studied Harry's face for a moment. "So you've been watching me for the past two hours then? That's a bit ... *creepy*, isn't it?"

He laughed. "I promise my intentions were honorable. I didn't want to rat you out to your parents, but I also wanted to make sure you didn't get hurt. Those were some pretty aggressive Seeker drills you were running. Was that a Sloth Grip Roll towards the end there?"

She took the proffered glass of water with a smile. "Yeah. That was actually my first time to try it." Then she hesitated. "So you're really not going to tell on me?"



"I promise I will pretend complete ignorance of your late night shenanigans provided you promise to be careful. Some of those drills can be dangerous. But anyway, it's obvious that you want to play Quidditch, and it's equally obvious that your family doesn't want you to – presumably because you're '*the baby girl*' or some such rubbish – so you're taking the initiative for yourself. I respect that. It's a perfectly Slytherin response."

Ginny looked annoyed at that. "Weasleys aren't Slytherins."

"Not true. Your grandmother Cedrella Weasley was a Slytherin, although admittedly she married into the family."

"How did you know about her?!" she asked in surprise.

"I have a keen interest in wizarding genealogy, and I did a brief study of the Weasleys and their connections to Slytherin House last fall. I was saving your grandmother's Sorting to annoy Ron with and just haven't had the chance yet."

She laughed at that. "Grandma was Cedrella Black before she married Septimus Weasley, for which she got blasted off the Black Family tapestry. There hasn't been a child with the surname Weasley to go into Slytherin in a hundred years or more. We're Gryffindor through and through."

"Like the Potters until I came along," said Harry with a grim smile. "You know, believe it or not, the Hat offered me Gryffindor. Said I would do best in Slytherin but Gryffindor was definitely an option."

"The Hat?"

"Oh, crap. Sorry, I wasn't supposed to say. That's how you get Sorted – by a magical talking hat that reads your mind

when you put it on. The Twins actually had Ron convinced that troll-fighting was involved. Just act surprised when you find out the truth, okay?"

She nodded, not entirely sure she believed the Slytherin about one of the most important choices in her entire life being decided by a magical headgear. "So you could have been in Gryffindor? With your brother?"

Harry's face darkened a bit before he shook it off. "Yeah, if I'd been inclined to spend the next seven years pretending to be something I'm not and living in the shadow of more famous relatives all just to please my parents. I said no – and the Hat actually congratulated me on being sensible enough to take its advice."

By that time, the two had made their way inside and were talking softly, but not so softly that they weren't heard.

"Ginny? Harry?" asked Mrs. Weasley from the top of the stairs. "What are you two doing up at this hour? It'll be dawn soon!"

Harry stepped forward before Ginny could say anything. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley. It was my fault. I woke up from a nightmare. You know, about that doxy attack. So I came down to get some water. Ginny heard me and came down to keep me company. I'm sorry we disturbed you."

"Oh! Oh, that's all right, deary! Do you need a Dreamless Sleep Potion?"

"No, thank you. I'm feeling much better now. We were just about to head back up to bed."

"Well, good night then. Or good morning, I suppose." She smiled at the boy and then went back upstairs.

Ginny was giving him a look. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a skillful liar?"

"Not really, since typically anyone who actually realized I was lying to them probably wouldn't find me very skillful. I notice you didn't jump forward to say '*actually, he was just watching me practice Quidditch at 2 a.m.*'" Harry smirked.

The girl snickered. "Fair point. Anyway, I guess I am a little tired now, so I'll see you at breakfast, I suppose?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

The two climbed the stairs, this time with Ginny making sure to step on the squeaky step, apparently to reassure her mother that she was going to bed. With a smile, Harry did likewise. "*When in Rome,*" he said to himself.

# Meet the Weasleys (Pt 2)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 5: Meet the Weasleys (Pt 2)

***10 June 1992***

A few hours later, Harry awoke at dawn out of an ingrained habit to get up and make the breakfast. Then, he looked around the room and realized once again that he wasn't that person anymore. Still, as he stared up at the ceiling of Charlie Weasley's dragon-infested bedroom, he found it impossible to fall back to sleep. Unbidden, his thoughts returned to what Snape, Artie, Hestia and Ted had told him – that there was some magical aura surrounding him that triggered an instinctive fear and dislike in Muggles. And apparently, if he stayed around them long enough, violent rage. He was safe here among the Weasleys, but the knowledge of his ... condition only made him angrier that he'd been abandoned by the Potters. Granted, his birth-parents couldn't have known that some outside force would drive the Dursleys to the brink of madness, but still, if the Potters had checked in on him even once, they'd have known about his treatment. Worst of all, now that he knew the truth, he actually felt a perverse sense of, well, *pity* for the Dursleys. After all was said and done, he really had ruined their lives with his "freakishness." Eventually, his brooding was interrupted by the smell of fresh coffee and the sound of sizzling bacon. He got dressed and went downstairs where he found Molly Weasley hard at work on an English Breakfast for eight.

"Oh, good morning, Harry! Did you sleep well?" she asked while stirring a skillet of scrambled eggs.

"Very well, Mrs. Weasley," he lied. "I'm sorry I woke you last night."

"Oh think nothing of it, dear. I'm just so sorry you had to go through an experience like that. Doxies are nothing to treat lightly, and Professor Snape said you'd run into a score or more."

"So I was told. I was very fortunate that the aurors showed up when they did." He looked around the kitchen at the numerous pots and pans Mrs. Weasley had in operation. "Can I help with anything?" he asked.

"No, Harry, but thank you for asking," she said without looking up from the stove. She was using magic, of course, with several spoons and whisks operating themselves. Harry was amused. Mrs. Weasley was clearly a fine cook. So was Harry for his age, which was what allowed him to appreciate her skill. With that, an idea began to form in his mind, and he began asking Molly some general questions about what kind of magic was used in cooking. To his surprise, there was no spellwork. The stove, the pots and pans, and even the mixing spoons were all magical items and required little effort to activate and set in motion.

Minutes later, Arthur Weasley came down and was also surprised to see Harry up so early. "Goodness me, Harry. I hope we didn't disturb you."

"Not at all sir. I'm an early riser. I used to have to cook breakfast for my relatives at about this time."

"Er, yes. Well, you needn't worry about that here, Harry. You're a guest after all." Arthur made a bit of a face at the

mention of Harry's relatives, and the boy was curious as to what he and Molly had been told about them. Hopefully nothing in depth – he loathed the idea of being pitied for his upbringing and would have been utterly humiliated if they'd known that Vernon had actually tried to kill him.

Percy and Ginny came down soon after, with Ginny blushing just a bit at the sight of Harry. Ten minutes after that, Molly had finished setting the table, at which point she stomped over to the stairs and bellowed: "FRED! GEORGE! RONALD! GET DOWN HERE IN THREE MINUTES OR YOUR BREAKFAST GOES TO FEED THE PIGS AND CHICKENS AND YOU THREE CAN HAVE COLD TOAST!"

Two minutes and forty-five seconds later, the three boys bounded downstairs to the breakfast table and joined the rest of their family. Despite himself, Harry found himself enjoying the boisterous family, and even Ron was starting to loosen up a bit, though he still seemed uncomfortable around Harry.

About halfway through, breakfast was interrupted by the arrival of an owl post. Molly retrieved the letter, gave the owl a treat, and sent it on its way. Even from his seat, Harry could see that the letter had a Hogwarts seal on it. Molly opened the letter and made a face as she read it.

"What is it, Molly?" asked Arthur.

"A letter from Minerva about the text book requirements for this year," she said distractedly.

"It's a bit early for our school lists, isn't it, mum?" asked Percy.

"Oh, it's not the full list. She's just giving me a heads up about the DADA books. Apparently, Flourish & Blotts

informed her that there will be more required texts than usual this year." Harry thought he noticed a flash of concern cross Molly's face.

"Speaking of books," said Ginny. "I've been meaning to ask. When we go to pick up my school supplies, can I get a new diary? I've nearly filled up the one I've been using."

"Hmm. We'll see, Ginny. We'll see." Molly spoke distractedly while still reading the letter. It occurred to Harry that she must be worried about the cost. With five children at Hogwarts this year, any increase in the number of required texts might mean a significant increase in the family's education expenses. Not that Harry could help with that – if the Weasleys wouldn't accept a fair payment for putting him up for the week, they'd certainly never accept charity to help with school supplies. He shrugged internally and went back to his eggs and sausages.

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After breakfast and washing up, it was finally time for Harry's initiation into the traditional wizarding sport of Quidditch, a game that until now he'd seen but never played. Out on the Weasley pitch were Harry, Ron, Percy and the Twins. Ginny was there "to watch." They were joined by Cedric Diggory, who was both a neighbor and the Seeker for the Hufflepuff team and who had been a friend of the Weasley children for most of their lives. He was eager to get some practice in over the summer as he was still smarting from Jim Potter beating him in under five minutes during their last match.

To the surprise of the Weasleys, Cedric was joined by three other children: Tamsin Applebee, a rising Third Year who would be starting as a new Chaser for the Badgers; Susan Bones, a Puff in Harry and Ron's year who was in Harry's

study group and who had a poorly concealed crush on Cedric; and Herb Fleet, a Fifth Year who had been the Puff's struggling Keeper for the last two seasons. Susan and Percy were both reluctant to play, but Harry rather skillfully goaded both of them into it and then presented the idea of having Ginny play too so that the teams would be even. Luckily, there were two extra brooms that used to belong to Charlie and Bill before they received new ones as graduation presents.

The four Weasley boys were all reluctant to allow their "baby sister" to play and especially to let her play Seeker against the older and more experienced Diggory. Harry just looked down his nose at them all and bet them each a galleon that she'd catch the Snitch before Cedric did. The desire to acquire free money overtaking their protective instincts, the brothers all agreed, though not before giving Cedric a few intimidating looks. For his part, Harry asked if he could take turns as both Seeker and Chaser – letting Ginny play Seeker first – as there would be openings for both on the Slytherin team in the coming year. Everyone agreed to switch up teams after a few matches.

With only ten players, each team played with only a single Beater and only two Chasers. This gave the Twins the rare experience of playing against each other. For the home team, Ginny was Seeker, Ron was Keeper, Harry and Percy were Chasers, and Fred was Beater. For the away team, Cedric was Seeker, Herb was Keeper, Tamsin and Susan were Chasers, and George drew the short straw and was Beater against his four siblings.

As the teams were getting ready to kick off, Harry walked over to Ginny, who was visibly pale at the thought of playing Seeker against Cedric. Harry reassured her in his own inimitable style.



"Look, it's okay. Just do your best. I only really need you to catch the Snitch during the first match. If you do, I'll make four galleons off your brothers, which I'll split with you 50-50."

"You bet on me?! Are you *nuts*?!" Ginny whispered urgently. "You expect me to beat *Cedric Diggory* who's been playing for his house team for a year?!"

"Who's been playing for the *Hufflepuff* house team for a year," he whispered back. "Which means that he'll be honorable, he'll be chivalrous, and he'll be all about fair play. He won't go all out to embarrass someone he thinks is a complete amateur who's hardly ever been on a broom before. And he'll also be distracted watching the performance of his own team's Chaser and Keeper. They're the weak links in the Hufflepuff team, which I assume is why he brought them all the way out here for a pick-up game. Stay close to him. Don't show off. Ask him lots of innocuous and slightly dumb questions about the game, about Hogwarts, about whether Snape is as awful as Ron says, whatever. If you notice Applebee or Fleet doing anything stupid, ask him if they're supposed to be doing that. Then, when you see the Snitch, ask him about Herb doing something particularly stupid whether he is or not, and when Diggory looks away, go for the Snitch!"

"That's cheating!"

"Nonsense. There's no rules against Seekers talking to one another during a match. If the Great Cedric Diggory is so easily distracted, that's his fault, not yours." Harry turned and looked towards the Twins and Ron. "More importantly, if you catch the Snitch before Diggory – even *once* – your brothers will *never* say anything about you playing Quidditch again."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at Harry before turning away and heading to the center of the pitch. Her reaction gave no sign as to whether she would follow his advice or not. He shrugged and took his own place. Seconds later, the game started. The balls were practice balls enchanted for casual use. The Bludgers wouldn't hit as hard, the Snitch wouldn't fly as fast or as irregularly, and the Quaffle would fall slower and could be recovered more easily before it hit the ground. Unlike real matches, pick-up matches were timed, and if no one caught the Snitch within a preset time limit, it would let out a loud whistle and drop to the ground, signifying that the match was over with no points awarded to either team for catching it.

Very quickly, Harry realized something that came as rather a shock: he was *really* good at flying. He didn't know if he was as good as Jim, but he was *very* good for an inexperienced player with only a few hours of classroom training from Madam Hooch (whose primary goal was to make sure none of the First Years crashed and died under her watch). This realization of Harry's came right around the time he effortlessly dove between two crisscrossing Bludgers to catch the Quaffle that Applebee had overthrown towards Susan. Without even a second thought, he swooped back up and then fired the ball directly through the goalpost past the astonished Fleet. The Puff Keeper successfully blocked the next three goal attempts, but Harry remembered Marcus Flint mentioning the boy's "tells," and he quickly got into a rhythm that the other boy couldn't match. Nor was he a ball hog. Harry soon got a feel for when Percy was open and in better scoring position, and once he was confident that Percy could reliably catch and throw the Quaffle, he was generous in setting his fellow Chaser up to take the point.

Unfortunately, if Herb Fleet couldn't keep up with Harry's sense of rhythm, Ron was equally hopeless against Tamsin Applebee, who was *very* good and had scored almost as many points on him as Harry and Percy had scored together against Fleet. Finally, Fred called a time out and headed towards Ron to chew him out when Percy intervened.

"Let me talk to him," Percy said.

"I've got more Quidditch experience than you," said Fred irritably.

"I know, but I've got more Big Brother experience than you, so back off and let me talk to him," said Percy with surprising firmness. Fred grumbled but did not interfere as Percy flew over to talk to Ron. Harry and Fred were too far away to hear anything, but Harry did notice that Ron gave sullen looks in the direction of both Twins ... and him. But after a few seconds of conversation, he seemed to buck up and gave Percy a serious-looking nod. The game resumed, and Ron's performance improved quite noticeably.

Suddenly, there was a wild commotion, and Harry had pull up short to dodge the blur that flew straight down in front of him, one that narrowly evaded a Bludger as it plummeted. It was Ginny flying straight at the ground and followed closely by Cedric Diggory. At the last second, Ginny pulled out of her dive and skirted along just inches above the grass with one hand outstretched. Then, she pulled up, her arm raised in triumph. The girl, who was not yet eleven, had caught the Snitch before the star Seeker of the Hufflepuff house team! Her brothers stared in complete astonishment, while Harry grinned for a brief second before schooling his face into a mask of near-boredom, as if it were perfectly obvious what was going to happen.

"Gentlemen, I believe that will be a total of four galleons. I promise it will be put to good use."

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Of course, after Ginny's spectacular score, Cedric wised up and realized that while Ginny was not of his caliber, she was no complete amateur either. He upped his game accordingly, and while Ginny would catch the Snitch once more (and come close a few times), that was nothing compared to Cedric's five saves. At that point, Harry and Ginny traded places, and Harry performed a little better against Diggory, with the latter winning seven to four before they called it a day. Harry demonstrated an uncanny eye for spotting the Snitch and an absolute fearlessness for diving after it, but a handful of flying lessons back during the previous Fall were no match for a year of intensive team workouts plus two summers of Seeker training camps. At the age of fourteen, Cedric already had serious aspirations of professional Quidditch and apparently might actually have the chops for it. And while he'd planned to use the day's activities to get some extra practice for his Keeper and Chaser, he was delighted to play against two Seekers who actually made him work for the Snitch. On the way back to the house, the Weasley brothers paid Harry the Galleons they owed – three cheerfully, one (Ron) grudgingly – and when they weren't looking, he passed half the Galleons to Ginny with a wink.

After dinner, Harry grabbed a quick shower, dressed, and headed to the Floo for his first tutoring session since the doxy attack. To his surprise, he was accompanied by Percy. In light of the attack, Mrs. Weasley was uncomfortable just letting Harry go off to Diagon Alley by himself. Meanwhile, Percy was happy to have an excuse to get away from the Twins and spend his time in the Flourish & Blotts reading room while Harry was getting a two-hour tutoring session

in advanced potion-making from Tonks in Room 13 of the Leaky Cauldron. Harry was a bit surprised when, at the end of the session, Artie Podmore showed up. He was even more surprised when he heard the message the man was sent to convey.

"The Potters are inviting *me* to Jim's birthday party?!"

"It would be more accurate to say that they want to celebrate both your birthdays simultaneously since you are twins after all."

"First time for everything, I suppose. So what's the catch?" the boy asked.

"No obvious ones. They know you're not with the Dursleys. In fact, given James's position with the Auror Corps, I'm sure he's had access to the official report on the doxy attack and the auror's interview with the Dursleys. So far, we've just said that 4 Privet Drive is unsafe because you were attacked there by a suspiciously large doxy swarm, but the Potters likely know that Vernon actively tried to feed you to the little beasts. Maybe this is their way of making amends. Or maybe this is their way of sounding you out on whether you plan to expose what Vernon did as a way to have them declared unfit guardians. Which we *could*, but it would probably also reveal the truth about your ... little problem."

Harry considered that. He absolutely did *not* want the Potters finding out about the effect that his aura triggered in Muggles. It would probably confirm every one of James's paranoid fears about Harry following "the Dark Path," whatever that was. If sharing a birthday party with Jim could divert them from that, it might be worth it. Plus, Hermione and Neville could go to their house-mate's party

and firm up their Gryffindor relationships without feeling bad about ditching him.

"Just to be clear," he said. "I am *not* moving in with the Potters full time."

"Of course not. But look at it this way. This will be your first chance to see Potter Manor. That's part of *your* birthright. When you eventually become Lord Potter, it will be the seat of *your* House. I think it's high time you at least got a tour of it."

Harry thought about that. "If it's my birthday, can I invite friends?"

Artie hesitated. "They said you could invite anyone except the children of accused or convicted Death Eaters. Which, since any guests will have to be keyed into the wards for the day, is not an unreasonable request."

*"But it **would** exclude Theo," Harry thought. "Although, if I invited Theo, I would have to invite Draco too, which would probably be a disaster. If nothing else, that would ensure some bit of unpleasantness with the Weasley children, and Ron aside, they've been far too nice to me to put up with that."*

"Okay, I'll go. But I'm going that morning and leaving that afternoon. I'll owl you a list of people I'd like to invite next week after Augusta Longbottom gets back and I can ask her advice. Let me know if the Potters disapprove of any of them before we send out invitations." He thought for a moment. "Was Serena Zabini ever accused of being a Death Eater?"

"I don't think so. I'm pretty sure she was living abroad for the entirety of the War."

"Then why do people talk about her in nervous hushed whispers."

Artie coughed. "Well, I imagine it's because she's been married seven times... and also widowed seven times. And each dead husband left her an increasingly larger inheritance."

Harry blinked in surprise and then remembered his exchange with Blaise when Zabini first asked to join Hermione's study group.

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*"Can you resist the temptation to insult anyone's parentage for several hours at a time?" Harry asked archly.*

*"If everyone can go that long without insulting my own parentage, then certainly," Blaise replied evenly.*

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*"Oh," Harry thought now. "So **that's** what he was talking about! I **really** need to get better at asking followup questions."*

## Chapter End Notes

RE: last chapter. Obviously, when Snape was a lad, he played "football" rather than "soccer." But I've already loaded that chapter a total of three times due to mistakes I'd missed and I just couldn't be buggered to do it a fourth time just to correct a throwaway line. Please excuse my horrible laziness, but it was the start of a four-day weekend.

# Ron's Day

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 6: Ron's Day

Just after nine o'clock, Harry and Percy returned to the Burrow. Harry had made a point of introducing Percy to Artemus Podmore, and the two actually compared a few "war stories" during their brief conversation, Artie having been a prefect himself during his Hogwarts days. When they passed through the Floo, Molly was there to greet them both with a late night snack. Ron was also reading on the couch, but almost immediately, he slammed his book closed and stalked up the stairs. Harry sighed and decided it was finally time for him to do something about Ron's hostility.

A bit later, Harry knocked softly on Ron's door.

"Who is it?" Ron asked.

"It's Harry. Can I come in for a second?"

There was a long pause before Ron finally opened the door.  
"What do you want?"

"Just to talk. I come in peace, I promise."

Ron didn't say anything. Instead, he left the door open as he went to lie down on his bed. Harry came in and looked around, closing the door behind him. He'd been joking with Snape about a room decorated in Gryffindor colors and Chudley posters, but apparently his words had been



prophetic as they described Ron's room to a T. Harry sat down in a chair next to the door while Ron just stared up at the ceiling over his bed.

"Ron, I know you're ... not happy that I've been staying here. Honestly, it wasn't my preferred option either. Not that your family isn't wonderful. They are, and I'm honestly a bit jealous of you for having them. But I didn't have any other options, and I'm here for the rest of the week, so I'd really like for us to at least try to get along instead of feeling like you're mad at me for breathing too loudly or something. Now, have I actually done *anything* to you for you to dislike me as much as you do? Or is it still just that I'm in Slytherin? Because, you know, we *did* all team up to fight Voldemort just last month. I think that ought to earn me at least a little credit, don't you?"

Ron closed his eyes and was silent for a few seconds before he spoke. "*We* didn't fight ... You-Know-Who."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"*We* didn't. *You* fought him, and then Jim fought him and drove him off. In the meantime, Zabini and Nott freed the rest of us from our bonds, Neville nearly killed himself taking down the flame trap, Hermione was the one who *figured out* how Neville could take down the flame trap, and I ... stood around like a great useless lump. My best friend was fighting You-Know-Who, and I ran like a coward."

"Ron, you ran like a sensible person. I was trying to get Jim to follow *your lead* and run up the stairs when Voldemort blasted us. We were all First Years. None of us should have been trying to fight Quirrell, let alone Voldemort. You can't blame yourself for not fighting against a much more

powerful enemy when the Boy-Who-Lived only beat him through some weird Dark-Lord-Slaying power that he doesn't even understand himself. And anyway, if that's what you're upset about, why are you taking it out on me?"

"Because you're the one flashing all your galleons with summer tutoring that my family couldn't afford in a million years!" Ron said hotly.

"Ah! Well, I am sorry about that. No, wait a minute! *I'm not sorry at all!* I spent *ten years* being treated like a house elf by a family of Muggles so awful that they make Draco Malfoy look like a Hufflepuff prefect! I'm not going to apologize to you or anyone else for finding out at the age of eleven that I'm not a penniless orphan but instead a trust fund baby who'd been abandoned by neglectful parents! Particularly not when I'm using that money to better myself instead of blowing it on Quidditch brooms and chocolate frogs!"

Ron shrank back from Harry's tirade, and he had no response.

"Now then," continued Harry more calmly, "you're upset that I'm trying to better myself and am spending money to do so. Well, you don't *need* money to better yourself as a wizard, though I admit it does help. But what have *you* been doing this summer to improve yourself that *doesn't* require money? Have you even finished your homework?"

"It's not due till September!?" Ron said, horrified.

"So? I've finished mine. Hermione's finished hers. I'll bet you another galleon that Lily Potter made sure that Jim has finished his by now. The people who are at the top of their class don't get there by making excuses or procrastinating. If you're so worried that you can't properly help Jim on his

little *adventures*, then you either work to improve yourself until you *can* help him or else you find another friend. Because while it pains me to say this, Jim *is* the Boy-Who-Lived, so he's probably going to have insane lunatics coming after him for the rest of his life."

Ron glared at Harry, but as the boy's harsh words sank in, he leaned back and resumed staring at the ceiling. "Whatever. It looks like it'll be the second option anyway. Jim doesn't want to have anything to do with me."

"Oh, come on! I saw you two at the train station, and you were thick as thieves."

"Well, that was before we got home. Since then, I've sent a half-dozen owl posts, and he hasn't responded to even one. I figure that after I ran from You-Know-Who, he doesn't think he can count on me and he cut ties. I can hardly blame him, really."

Harry thought on that. "Has he sent you an invitation to his birthday party?"

"His mom sent an invite for me and the Twins. I gather they invited our whole Gryffindor class *and* the whole Quidditch team *and* the children of any influential Ministry officials who might possibly have met Jim somewhere. It's not exactly Jim and his close friends or anything."

Harry rubbed his temples for a few seconds. "So you're invited to his party, but no personal communications. I see. Tell me, Ron, has anyone mentioned anything to you about my run-in with the crazy house elf?"

"The crazy ... what?!"

"The night I was attacked by that doxy swarm, I had an encounter with a strange, mentally-addled house elf who tried to warn me that one or both of the Potter Twins would be in terrible danger at Hogwarts this year. And out of a twisted, poorly conceived attempt to discourage me from returning to school in the fall, he had been intercepting my incoming and outgoing owl posts. And I *assume* he's been doing the same thing to Jim."

Ron sat up excitedly. "You mean ..."

"I *mean* that Jim has probably spent the past several weeks brooding over the fact that none of his friends have sent him any owl posts or responded to any that he'd sent out. Now, you do what you want, but my recommendation is that tomorrow morning you have your Mum contact Potter Manor via Floo, talk with Lily, and *see* if Jim has tried to send owl posts that weren't answered. If the answer is yes, maybe they'll even let you go over and visit Jim personally."

"Wow! I will! Um, and ... thanks ... Harry."

"No problem, Ron. I'll see you tomorrow." Harry sighed, wondering how he had become the Gryffindor House agony aunt and how long it would be before distraught Lions came to him for romantic advice.

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## ***11 June 1992***

The next morning, at Ron's request, Molly Floo-called Potter Manor and spoke to Lily. Apparently, Harry's theory had been correct: Jim had not gotten any owl posts from any of his friends so far that summer. Lily was quite pleased at the thought of Ron coming over as Jim "really needed to have some friends around." Harry overheard that bit from the kitchen table and filed the comment away for future

consideration. A half-hour later, Ron stepped through the fireplace to visit Jim for the rest of the day.

For his own part, Harry spent most of the morning going over Occlumency exercises, reviewing notes from various tutors on areas of improvement, and preparing a preliminary list of friends and associates who he thought the Potters might allow to come to the party. He spent the afternoon flying with the Twins and later talking with them about some of their more interesting pranking ideas. They had a good laugh over the prank Harry had pulled on Jim during the previous Easter Break involving the Potter invisibility cloak. While they disagreed with the sentiment, they both thought that "Slytherins Rule! Gryffindors Drool!" was hilarious. Ron returned at 5:30, just before dinner (and just in time to hear Harry's story), and he seemed oddly subdued. After dinner, Harry pulled him aside and asked if everything was okay with Jim.

"Huh? Oh ... yeah, everything's fine. It was like you said. He just hadn't gotten any of my owl messages. He asked his... your ... anyway, he asked Mrs. Potter if I could start going over there more often - two or three times a week if Mom will allow it, or maybe a few weekend sleepovers."

"That's ... good, right?" asked Harry.

"Yeah, it's just... well, you were right about how I need to be a better wizard if I'm going to stay friends with Jim. He's gotten a really ... focused since we left King's Cross. Anyway, I'm about to head upstairs. Jim gave me a book to start reading." Ron held the book up, and Harry recognized it as an old DADA text - the same edition, in fact, that Tonks was using to teach him. He said nothing about that, though, as Ron walked away to speak with the Twins about whether

he could join them in their Quidditch weight-training sessions.

"Why do I suddenly feel an sense of impending doom?" Harry muttered to himself as he watched the boy head up the stairs.

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***Earlier that morning...***

The main fireplace in Potter Manor was situated in its Great Hall, so that as a visitor steps out of the Floo Network, he is confronted by a large wall sporting scores of paintings of past Potter Lords and Ladies, all of whom stare down imposingly upon any new arrivals. In the center was a truly enormous portrait of Guy du Poitier who had been the first of his line to sit on the Wizengamot in its earliest iteration and who founded what would become the Ancient and Noble House of Dupoitier (which was renamed House Potter centuries later once the last vestige of the family's French roots were excised). Sir Guy's portrait was a good fifteen feet tall and eight feet wide and would not have fit in any room in Potter Manor smaller than the Great Hall. Like most of the pictures facing the fireplace, du Poitier's painting predated the creation of moving portraits by centuries, so the legendary figure was both silent and still, but that did nothing to reduce his prominence. And so it was that when Ron Weasley stepped out of the fireplace and looked around, his very first impression was of the legendary Potter founder looking down on him in judgment.

Almost instantly, Lily Potter swept into the room. "Hello Ron! So glad you could make it. Come on, I'll show you up to Jim's rooms." Lily's smile relaxed Ron a bit, but he was still nervous. It was one thing to know that Jim Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, was also a son of the illustrious House

Potter. It was another to actually come into a home with such pedigree, an ancestral manse only a few centuries younger than Hogwarts itself. Out of reflex, he looked down at the orange Chudley Cannons jersey he was wearing, the one with the persistent grease stain his mother could not remove, and for a second, he actually wished he'd followed Molly's wish that he "dress up" to meet the Potters. Granted, Lily herself was wearing comfortable Muggle clothing, but Ron still felt overwhelmed by the Manor's grandeur.

"Jim has rooms? Like, more than one?"

"Well, he has his bedroom, of course. But over the past few weeks, he's taken over the room next door and, well, converted it into a sort of training room."

"For spell training?"

"Physical training," Lily said in an odd voice. "He's been working really hard." She led Ron out of the hall and up a flight of stairs. "So, Molly said that the problem was some house elf stealing owl posts. What was that all about?"

"I don't rightly know, Mrs., um, Lady Potter. It's just what Harry said. There was a house elf who told him either he or Jim or maybe both would be in danger at Hogwarts, and it stole all their mail to make them feel like they wouldn't be wanted at school."

"An odd strategy. But then, house elves can be odd creatures. Honestly, I've never been completely comfortable with them, not even with the ones we have here, but they've assured me that they are capable of keeping out any foreign house elves. Oh, and Mrs. Potter is fine. I'm not big into the whole '*your Ladyship*' thing when I can avoid it." She hesitated. "How is Harry?"

"He seems fine to me, Mrs. Potter. He's been getting along well with my family, and he was the one who gave me the advice to get Mum to call you about the mail. He spends his days studying and flying with the Twins, and he's started getting special tutoring in Diagon Alley. My brother Percy is escorting him to make sure he's safe."

"Good, I'm glad to hear he's being looked after," she replied with a bit of sadness in her voice. By that point, they'd gotten to the top of the stairs, and Ron noticed an odd rhythmic "thump-thump" sound coming from farther down the hall. Lily sighed.

"From the sound of things," Lily said, "I don't think Jim has quite finished his morning work-out. He may ask you to wait for a few minutes."

She hesitated and then looked at Ron intently. There was something in her expression that Ron was too young to understand. Mostly parental concern such as he might recognize in his own mother's eyes, but Lily's emotions were tinged with deeper subtleties that were beyond his experience.

"Ron," she said, "be patient with him. What happened at the end of last term with Quirrell and ... well, it affected him. More than I thought it had at first. I don't think the changes he's going through are ... necessarily bad, but he may be a bit ... intense, possibly to a degree that might worry you. But regardless, I *know* he considers you to be his best friend. And I think he really *needs* a best friend right now, so please remember that if he acts a little ... difficult at any point. Okay?"

Ron wasn't really sure what Lily Potter was talking about, but he knew that Jim was *his* best friend too, so he nodded



solemnly at her. They continued on down the hall, and the rhythmic thumping grew louder. As they approached the door, Ron noticed that the thumping sound was accompanied by a loud grunting in Jim's voice.

Lily opened the door and led Ron into "the gym." It was a thirty-by-thirty room with a big bay window that had heavy curtains to block out the sun. The only illumination came from magical orbs hanging from the ceiling which left the room rather dim and gloomy. It also smelled strongly of sweat. There was a brand new set of free weights and other exercise equipment near the door. The Twins had a similar setup, albeit smaller and second-hand, as Beaters were expected to have more upper body strength than the average Quidditch player. Just past the weights, Ron was disturbed to see what looked like a darts board ... except that instead of darts, it had what looked like small throwing knives embedded into it. Well, into it and all around it – Jim wasn't a very good shot with a knife yet. Speaking of whom, the Boy-Who-Lived was in the far corner in cut-off black sweat pants and a grey tank-top. He was barefooted and had tape around his hands, which he was using to assault a heavy leather punching bag that looked almost as big as himself. He was also utterly drenched with a few seconds, he noticed Ron and Lily's presence, and acknowledged his friend's arrival with a breathless smile.

"Ron! *pant* It's great to see you, *pant* buddy! Give me just *pant* thirty more seconds to finish this set of reps, okay?"

Ron, who had no idea what "reps" were, nodded. Lily watched her son for a few seconds and then said tightly, "I'll leave you boys to talk. Send a house elf for me if you need me for anything. Lunch is at noon." Then, she left, stopping only to look back at Jim with an unreadable expression. For

his part, Jim nodded without even taking his eyes off the punching bag. Then, he took a step back and began targeting the bag with a series of side kicks that came up high enough to strike a man in the stomach or even the solar plexus. He did a total of twenty kicks with each leg, each accompanied with a fierce guttural "Kai!" before he finally took a break and came over to Ron, pausing to pick up a towel and a bottle of water off a nearby table. He gave Ron a warm smile and stuck out his hand.

"I'd give you a hug but I'm kinda sweaty," he said still somewhat breathlessly.

Ron happily shook Jim's hand. "That's okay. What was that you were doing over there anyway?"

"It's called Taekwondo. It's a Muggle style of hand-to-hand combat. Korean originally. There's a squib my Mom found who runs a dojang – that's a Taekwondo training center – in London. We Floo him in two days a week for training. I started it a few years ago, basically just fooling around, but I've gotten a bit more serious this year after ... well, after what happened. I'm limited in how much time I have for wand magic during the summer, and also I've learned the hard way that a wizard still needs to be able to take care of himself unarmed since you never know when a bad guy can steal your wand away."

"Oh," said Ron quietly. He was surprised to learn that wand-magic was allowed *at all* during the summer but said nothing about that. The two boys looked at one another uneasily as if neither knew what to say. Finally, Jim sat down at the table and gestured for Ron to sit opposite him.

"Okay, first things first, I guess. Mom said that there's some crazy house elf that's been stealing everybody's mail.

What's the story there?"

"Well," said Ron tentatively, "all I really know is what Harry told me last night."

"Harry was at your house last night?" interrupted Jim, almost suspiciously.

"Yeah, he's staying with us till next week when he moves in full-time with Neville. Anyway, last week, while Harry was outside at his relatives' place, he had some kind of encounter with a house elf. The elf told him that either he, or you, or both of you maybe, would be in danger at Hogwarts this year. So to discourage you both from returning, it had been stealing any letters your friends had sent to you so far this summer." Ron hesitated. "As well as, you know, any letters you might have sent out to your friends."

Jim said nothing but took another sip from his water bottle, so Ron continued.

"Anyway, the elf gave Harry his letters back and left, but then this *huge* doxy swarm showed up and attacked Harry before he could get inside the house. After that, they decided to move him away from those Muggles. The Burrow is warded against house elves. Bill ... that's my oldest brother, the curse-breaker ... anyway, when he was at Hogwarts, there was some Slytherin he'd gotten into a feud with during Seventh Year, and the Slytherin sent a house elf to do some pranks around the Burrow during the Summer. So he made sure we had wards against house elf intruders. That's why they sent Harry to us."

Jim nodded at that. "How badly was Harry hurt?"

"I don't know really. He seems fine now."

"Do they know who the house elf belonged to? Who it is that's plotting to kill us?"

Ron was startled at that. He hadn't really thought about things in terms of possible murder plots, and it was disturbing to him that such ideas were the very first place Jim's mind seemed to go. "I, uh, don't know anything about that. I don't think Harry knows either."

"Probably not," said Jim. Then, he looked away, frustrated. "Not that they'd tell us if they did know. Better that we never know anything important so we can pretend that the world is all sunshine and roses."

The bitterness in Jim's voice troubled Ron. During First Year, Jim had always been openly hostile to Slytherins, especially Harry, and he'd come to Hogwarts with a huge ego that exploded messily the first week of school after that first Potions class. But after that, he'd gradually calmed down and developed both self-discipline and social skills. By the end of the year, he was basically a likeable if hot-tempered boy with a lot of friends, albeit few outside his house and none in Slytherin. *This* Jim, on the other hand, looked like he was on the verge of developing nervous tics.

"Jim, you're kind of scaring me a bit. What's been going on the last few weeks?"

Jim rubbed his hand across his mouth as he tried to decide how much to reveal to Ron. "I've ... learned things this summer. Things I wasn't supposed to know." He laughed nervously. "It's funny. I used to get so mad at my parents and at Dumbledore for keeping things from me. For treating me like I was a child. And now, I understand why they did and part of me wishes that I could go back to being that ignorant child."

He looked at Ron intently. "And, I'm also sorry, but a lot of it is stuff I can't tell you. Not yet. Maybe not ever. You know that Voldemort," Ron twitched, "read our minds last year, and the things he learned from us ... from me, nearly led to his full resurrection. If he or one of his servants learns what I've learned, it could be a disaster. I want to learn Occlumency, but my parents are fighting me on it. Mom has said that I need more self-discipline and that she'll talk to Dad again once I get my blue belt."

Ron didn't even know what Occlumency was, let alone how Taekwondo belt rankings worked, so he had difficulty in processing what Jim had said. "So, you received some secret information about ... You-Know-Who that your parents didn't want you to have. Do they know that you know?"

"No, and honestly I'm afraid to tell them. I don't think they'd try to Obliviate it out of me, but I can't take the chance. I can't go back to just ... stupid blithering ignorance."

"How can I help?" Ron said earnestly.

Jim hesitated. "Before I answer that, ... I have a confession to make. You said that a house elf had been intercepting any owl posts I sent out. That's a good thing actually, because I only sent you one letter, just a few days after ... after I learned the truth. I'm glad you didn't get it. It was ... cowardly for me to say what I said in a letter instead of to your face. You deserve better. I assumed you'd actually gotten the letter and that was why you never wrote back to me."

Ron's stomach clenched. This was it. This was when Jim would cut ties with him because the Boy-Who-Lived couldn't

be saddled with a coward who ran at the first sign of trouble.

"I said a lot of things in that letter. About how sorry I was that you were put into danger just for being my friend. About how sorry I was that I'd been a jerk all year to so many people. About how I finally understood for the very first time that being 'the Boy-Who-Lived' was about more than going to society events and having children's adventure books written about me. Being 'the Boy-Who-Lived' necessarily implies that other people *die*. One of the things I learned this summer that I *can* tell you is that all four of my grandparents died before I was born. I already knew that, of course, but I never knew that they'd all been *murdered by Death Eaters* as revenge for my parents standing up to Voldemort. I also learned the real reason that my parents sent Harry away - they were both afraid he'd be killed just for being around me."

He took another swig of water and then looked back up at Ron. "So, after everything I just said, do you still want to be my friend? Knowing what the cost might be? Knowing that someday Death Eaters might come after you or your loved ones just because of our connection? You're already one of a handful of people alive today who've seen Voldemort's face and lived to tell about it. I remember how incredibly brave you were during the chess game on the way to the Philosopher's Stone - how you were willing to sacrifice yourself to ensure that I would make it to face Voldemort. Are you sure you want to press your luck again?"

Ron was rendered nearly speechless by what Jim had said. He'd been so ashamed of what he considered a moment of weakness in the Mirror Room that he'd forgotten about the chess game, about how he'd deliberately sacrificed his own piece to allow Jim to advance more quickly, and how he

might have died but for Neville's quick thinking. And now, after weeks of self-doubt, Ron finally started to feel his Gryffindor courage stir once more. "Like I said, what do you need me to do?"

Jim grinned and exhaled the breath he didn't even notice he was holding. Ron was stunned to realize how afraid Jim had been of being rejected. Of being rejected by *Ron Weasley*. No one in the *world* had ever cared that much about being Ron's friend.

"Well, we won't be doing much today. We'll have some lunch, maybe fly for a while later. And then we'll make plans and schedules. We both have a lot of training ahead of us."

Ron nodded. "Right. Training to fight ... Voldemort." He shuddered at the name, but he was still proud to be able to say it, as Jim was proud for him. Despite that, the other boy shook his head.

"No, Ron. We're not training to fight Voldemort." Jim's expression hardened. "We're training to *kill* Voldemort."

## Chapter End Notes

RE: Jim's current attitude. A significant portion of HP fandom was openly appalled by the scene in Dumbledore's office at the end of OotP, the one where the old man reveals (among other things) that he concealed the Prophecy from Harry for years for the stated reason of allowing Harry to hold onto his "childhood" for as long as possible. It seems to me that most fans are wholly unpersuaded by Dumbledore's reasoning, particularly in light of what his childhood with the Dursleys was like. It's a common trope in HP fiction for Harry to learn the Prophecy early and to spend years preparing himself to fight Voldemort. But

since this story is frequently about subverting the standard tropes, I wondered: What if Dumbledore was right? What if telling an already traumatized 11-year-old child that he has to be the one to kill Voldemort and no one else can do it is a terrible idea almost certain to instill deep psychological problems in that child? Problems like paranoia, depression and an obsessive interest in nearly anything, from Taekwando to the Dark Arts, that might give him an edge against the greatest dark lord in living memory. Thus, Jim Potter, who learned nearly all of the Prophecy in the last chapter of Year One, has basically gone all Bruce Wayne and decided at the age of 11 that he shall train like mad until he is a match for Voldemort. The problem, of course, is that, unlike Bruce Wayne, Jim's not the protagonist.:)



# Countdown to a Birthday

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 7: Countdown to a Birthday

### *15 July 1992*

Harry remained at the Burrow for another four days. During that time, Ron only made one more all-day trip to Potter Manor, though he took up running and weight-lifting while at home at the Burrow and, to Harry's surprise, finished most of his homework. Even more surprising, he showed a little humility and asked Harry (who was top of their year in DADA) a number of Defense questions that the Slytherin was happy to answer. At the stroke of noon on Wednesday, July 15th, Harry was to use a portkey that Lady Augusta had sent via Artie which would take him directly to Longbottom Manor. There, he would spend the rest of the summer with Neville. But he had one last thing to take care of before he left the Burrow.

On the morning of the 15th, Molly Weasley rose at seven o'clock to make breakfast as usual when, to her surprise, she found it was already in progress. As she descended the stairs, she was surprised by the sound of bacon frying and the smell of fresh coffee already made. And in the middle of her kitchen, whistling cheerfully as he whisked egg yolks into a bowl of fresh milk, was Harry Potter.

"Harry? What in heaven's name are you doing up this early? And cooking breakfast?!"

He turned and smiled at the woman. "Well, it's like this, Mrs. Weasley. This is my last day here, and I wanted to do something to show my appreciation for all the kindnesses you and your family have shown to me. Now, I was four years old when the Dursleys decided I needed to learn to cook for them ... to 'pay them back' as it were for the privilege of being allowed to live under their roof. Simple things when I was little, but increasingly fancy and complicated meals as I got older. And they never gave me any compliments or encouragement, just complaints when everything wasn't absolutely perfect. So I have been waiting over *seven years* for the chance to cook something nice for people I actually *like*. And honestly, there aren't many people I like right now better than the Weasleys."

At that, Molly's eyes misted a bit, and she came over and hugged the boy. Harry stiffened at first – he wasn't used to hugs or other displays of affection – but he relaxed into it.

"I know you'll be very happy at Longbottom Manor, but I promise you'll always be welcome here if you ever want to come back, Harry."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

"Now, what are you making for us?"

"Quiche Lorraine, Eggs Benedict, and Raspberry Scones."

"Goodness me," Molly said in amazement.

As the rest of the Weasleys came down, they were all equally impressed at Harry's skill in the kitchen. Mr. Weasley thought it a kind gesture, but he said that Harry shouldn't have spent money on food for them since he was the guest. Harry's eyes took on a mischievous gleam.

"Well actually, sir, your sons all pitched in with the expense. They each gave me some of their allowance last week, and I used that to buy the ingredients." He turned to the four surprised Weasley sons. "I did tell you it was for a good cause," he said with a smile.

Molly, now convinced that all four of her sons must have known of this surprise breakfast, went around and gave each of the startled boys a bone-crushing hug. Ginny, of course, knew exactly when and why the four had given up money to Harry – to pay off the bet they'd made over her Seeker's contest against Cedric Diggory – and she nearly laughed at the looks they were all giving him, looks that all seemed to say "*dammit, now I owe the **Slytherin** for this.*" Once breakfast was over, Percy, the Twins and Ron all immediately began clearing the table as Percy told their mother to sit and relax while they took care of the washing up.

Harry rose from the table. "While you're taking care of the dishes, I have one final surprise for you all." He darted upstairs and returned a moment later with paper sack marked with the logo of Flourish & Blotts from which he pulled several wrapped presents.

"Harry," said Molly, "You shouldn't have."

"It's just a small token of my regard, Mrs. Weasley. I hope you'll accept them and enjoy them all."

The Weasleys didn't know what to expect beyond the fact that from the shape of the presents they were all books. Molly was afraid at first that he'd bought the children textbooks. She was concerned about the school expenses but also was afraid her children would be embarrassed by charity. In fact, however, none of the books were school

books but instead were more personal gifts. For Ron, it was a copy of **Flying With the Cannons**. For Percy, **Prefects Who Gained Power**. The Twins, Harry had said, would have to share their gift, as **Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks** might be too dangerous for Hogwarts if they each had their own copy. Ginny's gift had no title, as it was just a very nice blank diary so that her parents wouldn't have to buy her one. Arthur was thrilled with his gift which was the only Muggle-written book of the bunch, a layman's introduction to Muggle electrical and automotive technology. Finally, for Molly, Harry had been pleased to find a book at Flourish & Blotts called **Mastering the Art of Magical French Cooking**. Harry explained to Molly that the original version was written by a famous Muggle named Julia Child who introduced millions of ordinary Muggles to French culinary techniques, explaining them in ways that someone without professional chef training could understand. Thanks to Petunia Dursley, it was literally one of the first books he learned to read. And apparently, Gaston Legard, the legendary head chef of Summerisles, learned about the book at some point and adapted it for the magical cooking techniques used by witches and wizards. All in all, the Weasleys were quite happy with their gifts, even Ron, and Harry was happy to have (hopefully) done a little bit to counteract Slytherin House's poor reputation.

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At noon, Harry said his final goodbyes, pulled out the portkey Artie had given him (a small flower vase with a cursive "L" inscribed on it), and said the activation word: "Sanctuary." Portkey travel was a profoundly unpleasant sensation, though he supposed he'd have to get used to it. After he recovered from the feeling of being dragged navel first through a plughole, Harry found himself at the front door of Longbottom Manor. On hand to greet him were Neville and Augusta Longbottom and two house elves.

As Neville stepped forward to welcome his friend, Harry was surprised at the boy's appearance. Since leaving Kings Cross, Neville had grown an inch, his hair had lightened, he'd lost a good bit of baby fat, and he had a *tan*! Harry hadn't thought the British could even get suntans. Certainly, he'd never managed it in ten years of summertime yard work.

"Neville! Great to see you, friend. And you as well, Lady Augusta. It seems that life in the Amazon agrees with you both."

Both Longbottoms laughed at that, and then Lady Augusta introduced the two house elves as Lumpen and Hoskins and directed them to carry Harry's trunk up to his room. She also reassured Harry that, as house elves bonded directly to the Manor, Lumpen and Hoskins would be able to ward off any unwelcome house elves, as a house elf's power is always greatest within its own domain. Then, she and Neville led Harry to a sunroom where they took lunch. It was the first chance for the boys to talk since they left Kings Cross back in June. Harry was amazed to hear about Neville's remarkable adventures in the Amazon jungle, including an unsuccessful quest for a rare flower which might hold the cure for lycanthropy, an encounter with a mysterious race of leopard people who lived in a city of gold deep within the jungle, and a desperate flight for his life after he accidentally breached the ancient lost temple of the Cult of the Nameless Xoanon! It was all very ... Gryffindorish, surprisingly so for a boy who'd previously expressed a desire to spend his whole summer just puttering around the family greenhouse repotting the venomous tentaculae. In comparison to Neville's holiday, Harry suddenly thought his run-in with a single hyperactive house elf and a storm of doxies seemed somewhat ... boring. Nevertheless, Neville and Augusta were suitably horrified

at how close Harry came to dying, so apparently he'd won the "death-defying sweepstakes."

"Alright, then," said Augusta. "That's quite enough about near-fatal experiences. My old heart isn't up to hearing any more." Neville, who'd seen Augusta's impressive dueling skills on display that summer in Brazil, resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. "Now, I understand, Harry, that you found a tutor for the summer break?"

"Yes, Lady Augusta, a former Hufflepuff who's going to the Auror Academy in the fall. She's the daughter of Andromeda and Ted Tonks."

"Ah, yes. I remember their marriage announcement in *The Prophet*. I think I may have heard Cygnus Black's screams of outrage all the way here in Lancashire. Have you found her satisfactory?"

"Very much so, ma'am, although she's only teaching me in the areas I'll be studying at Hogwarts: Charms, Transfiguration and Defense on the weekends and then Potions on every other Thursday night. I'm also studying estate management, etiquette, wizarding history and ... some other things on Tuesdays and those Thursdays not given over to Potions."

"An ambitious schedule. May I ask the long term goals behind all this self-study?"

Harry exhaled. "Aside from wanting to stay at the top of my class and beat Jim? It's in the back of my mind that if I can take some of my OWLS early and pass at least four of them, I can petition for emancipation. Obviously that's some time away, but if I push myself, it's doable the summer after my Third Year."

Neville whistled, while August merely nodded with some approval.

"As I said, ambitious. Also, and do excuse an old woman's nosiness, but do those 'other things' include Occlumency training?"

Harry glanced over at Neville who blushed and mouthed "*Sorry*."

"They do, Lady Augusta."

She sighed. "I hope you will proceed cautiously. There is an element of danger in such training, as well as a lifelong distrust from many members of our society if your training becomes common knowledge." She grimaced. "And I must say it angers me that such training is even necessary. Yet another way in which *James Potter* has failed in his paternal obligations, I suppose."

Harry was surprised at the hostility contained in that last comment. "How so, Lady Augusta?"

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise for a second. "Oh, of course. How silly of me to have assumed that someone would have actually *told* you what you have every right to know. You are the Potter Heir Presumptive, Harry. Somewhere in the Potter family vault should be a ring that will be yours when you become Heir Apparent, though your father has the absolute discretion to give it to you early if he chose to do so, as most Lords do for their Heirs. Every Wizengamot House has such rings, one each for the Head of House, the Consort and the Heir Apparent." She raised her left hand to display a gold band with a green stone inscribed with the letter 'L' on the ring finger.

"Among other benefits both magical and mundane, your Heir's ring would help to defend against Legilimency, the Confundus and many other lesser mind-altering spells – though not the Imperius of course – without the need for formal Occlumency training. Naturally, the Wizengamot does not tolerate its members, whether current or future, being subjected to casual psychic manipulation." She turned to Neville who was suddenly very intrigued. "And before you ask, Neville, I plan to present you with the Longbottom Heir's ring as a birthday present. It's presently at Gringotts being refurbished. I only wish it had been ready for you last year, as it might conceivably have protected you from Professor Quirrell's spells."

Neville smiled at that. Harry also smiled for his friend, although it was tinged with sadness. One more thing James Potter had kept from him.

"In the meantime, Neville, I would like for you to rest and enjoy yourself for the next two weeks or so. It was an eventful trip to the Amazon for us both, and you should recover from it. But if you wish to join Harry in receiving additional lessons, I will be happy to arrange it for the month of August. But don't go getting any funny ideas about '*emancipation*.' You will take your OWLS during Fifth Year like your father and grandfather before you, and you will do as well on them as they did."

"Yes, Gran," he said respectfully.

"Now, kindly show Harry up to his room and get him situated. After that, I imagine you'll be wanting to show him *the pool*... assuming you can find something to wear." She laughed loudly at that while Neville made a sour face and shook his head. Then, he rose from the table and led Harry away towards the stairs.



"What was with that crack about the pool?" Harry asked.

Neville snorted. "You remember how Uncle Algie tried to drown me when I was seven? Well, since then, I've always been afraid of large bodies of water ... until I got all my memories back. I decided that this summer was the time to conquer that particular fear, so while we were in Brazil, I learned to swim. Once I got over my jitters and mastered the basics, I really enjoyed it. So Gran sent word to the house elves to get the pool in the backyard cleaned out and filled with water. I haven't tried it yet, but I'm looking forward to it. Do you swim?"

"Never learned how. I suppose I ought to. The way things are going, I'm sure my life will depend on it at some point. But why did she think the idea was so funny?"

Neville coughed. "Well, you see ... I learned to swim while deep in the jungle from some local boys in one of the indigenous tribes and ... *they didn't use bathingsuits so we all went naked.*" He said that last bit as fast as possible, but Harry still understood it and couldn't suppress a bark of laughter.

"I see. So that new tan of yours – it's all over, I take it?" Neville didn't reply, but Harry was amused to realize that having a suntan didn't stop a person from blushing furiously.

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Three days later, invitations to Potter Manor as personal guests of Harry Potter on the occasion of his and Jim's joint birthday were sent to the following individuals and/or families (with Hermione and Neville told to simply accept Jim's prior invitation so as to not insult their house-mate):

*Miss Hannah Abbot*

*Amelia Regent Bones and her ward, Miss Susan Bones*

*Misses Margaret & Millicent Bulstrode*

*Miss Tracey Davis*

*The Right Honorable Amos Diggory and family*

*Sir Malcolm Finch-Fletchley (O.B.E.) and family*

*Mr. Marcus Flint*

*Daniel Lord Greengrass and family*

*The Right Honorable Hestia Jones, Esq.*

*Miss Olivia Kolumbiko*

*Samuel Lord McMillan and family*

*Howard Lord Montague and family*

*Mr. Madanapala Patil and family*

*The Right Honorable and Mme. Artemus Podmore, Esq.,*

*Healers Edward and Andromeda Tonks and family*

*Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Weasley and family*

*The Lady Serena Zabini, Dowager Contessa di Provence  
and her son, Mr. Blaise Zabini*

Lady Augusta assisted with the invitation list, guiding Harry through the absurdly overcomplicated process of properly addressing witches and wizards within various strata of British wizarding society. More importantly, she helped him to understand the potential benefits and ramifications of

each invitation. Apparently, the Potters had just sent out invitations to Jim's friends, ignoring their families (including siblings attending Hogwarts and several scions of Wizengamot families who would likely be offended at being excluded). According to Augusta, it was a faux pas to invite children to a party at a landed estate without at least a courtesy invitation to their parents and the rest of their immediate families. Most people overlooked it, however, as (a) James Potter had been offending high society with his tactlessness and lack of social graces for so long that most people were used to it and (b) any chance to bask in the reflected glory of the Boy-Who-Lived was aggressively sought by most high society and government types, even if James in years past had insisted on such garish frivolities as a limbo contest and a Muggle bouncy castle.

Harry, however, had no interest in bouncy castles – if he was going to share a birthday party with the Git-Who-Lived, he was going to use the opportunity to network like hell. Consequently, when a friend he wanted to invite was the child of someone who either Augusta or Artie thought might be important to Harry's longterm goals, the entire family got an invitation. Friends not from particularly important wizarding families – like the Bulstrode sisters or Marcus Flint – got regular invitations with the understanding that they'd be allowed to bring family or a date if they wanted. Harry *did* invite the entire Muggle family of Justin Finch-Fletchley, in part because of their financial connections and in part to rub Jim's nose in the fact that the *Slytherin* Potter was more open-minded about Muggles than the Gryffindor Potter.

Lady Augusta was also a font of gossip about wizarding high society, much of which would be at the birthday party whether they liked the Potters or not. Initially, Harry assumed that all the attention and gift-giving was what

made Jim such a spoiled brat, but Augusta corrected him. Apparently, since Halloween of 1981, Jim received literally hundreds of gifts every year on his birthday and at Christmas. To their credit, James and Lily thought that unseemly in light of their personal wealth, so they placed all gifts of cash or valuables into the Jim Potter Charitable Trust, which did things like raise money for St. Mungo's, Hogwarts and other non-profit wizarding ventures. They also made a big show of donating all the tangible gifts – toys, clothing, etc. – to needy wizarding children. Consequently, Jim's birthday had evolved over the years into a major charity event with wizarding elites of all stripes donating to the less fortunate by way of ceremonially giving something nice to the Boy-Who-Lived who then passed it along through the appropriate non-profit group. Jim himself probably only got presents from his parents and a few select family friends, but even people like the Malfoys who would never be allowed to set foot on the grounds of Potter Manor still sent gifts to the Boy-Who-Lived which he opened once before handing them off to be donated away.

Finally, while Augusta herself had never been to Jim's birthday party before, she had read press accounts and listened to gossip from friends who had gone. Her observation was that, however crude or obnoxious Jim had been during his first year at Hogwarts, he was *surprisingly* adept at handling himself in front of the press so as to ensure positive coverage. That might change now that he was approaching his teens, an awkward stage for most children, but he'd been giving interviews to journalists for years now. Augusta also noted with visible disdain that there would probably be what she referred to as a "*press availability*" in which he might conceivably be expected to participate (although she thought it would be madness for the Potters to actually *encourage* Harry to talk to the press given the state of their relationship). She

pulled old *Prophet* accounts of past birthday parties so that Harry could get a sense of what to expect. He was amazed to learn that Jim Potter had given his first public interview to the *Prophet* at the age of seven.

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### ***30 July 1992***

On the day before Harry's official birthday, he attended a much quieter affair at Longbottom Manor to commemorate Neville's birthday. Augusta hosted a small intimate luncheon attended by the rest of the Longbottom family, and Harry was introduced to Cousins Reginald and Enid and their families. None of them seemed to harbor any ill will over Algie Longbottom's banishment the previous year as far as Harry could tell, and they all applauded warmly as Augusta presented Neville with his Heir's ring. He would be eligible to take the Lord's ring after he'd turned fifteen and passed his OWLS.

Later that afternoon, after the Longbottom cousins had departed, another group of well-wishers showed up: Hermione, Blaise and most of the members of their study group. Only Anthony Goldstein and Theo Nott were absent. The former was in Hamburg for the summer with his parents, while the latter was still at Malfoy Manor, though each sent Happy Birthday wishes to both Neville and Harry. The rest arrived around four and had a light afternoon snack, during which Neville and Harry each opened the gifts brought for them by their friends. Neville was delighted to see that Harry had bought him a wand holster similar to the one Harry himself wore. He was much less pleased when, on his first attempt to use it, his wand shot out of his hand and knocked a pitcher of lemonade over onto the table, splashing both Hermione and Padma. A quick Scourgify from Augusta cleaned them both up instantly,

however, and Harry assured Neville that with a little practice, he'd soon get the hang of it.

After lunch was over, the group portkeyed together to London, where a large rental van picked them all up up (along with several parents and chaperones) and carried them to the West End for an introduction to British musical theater. Hermione and Justin Finch-Fletchley and their parents saw to the arrangements, and they decided that *Phantom of the Opera* with its gothic storyline and 19th century setting would be the most accessible show for young Purebloods. The other children were astonished at what Muggle special effects were possible in a theater and how Muggle technology could create what seemed like magic to the uninitiated. For his part, Blaise admitted that he'd enjoyed the show, but he still wished that Hermione had gone with *his* suggestion of going to the cinema to see the recently-released *Batman Returns*. However, Hermione and Justin agreed that the Purebloods already looked down on Muggles enough without suggesting to them that Muggle law enforcement consisted of heavily-armed vigilantes dressed in scary animal costumes.

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### ***31 July 1992***

On the morning of Harry's birthday, he rose early to prepare. The party officially started at noon, but by special arrangement, he was to go over to Potter Manor at nine o'clock. Attire for the day was "Muggle semi-formal" according to the invitation, so Harry dressed in khaki slacks, a blazer, an open collar shirt with a pullover sweater, and loafers. Neville (who deferred to his friend on Muggle fashion choices) and Augusta would accompany him, and Hestia, Artie and Snape would meet him at the Manor. Like all the other guests, their invitations contained special

portkeys that were keyed to their blood, names and magic and could not be used either by anyone else or to carry a passenger. At the stroke of nine, the three activated their portkeys. Several disorienting seconds later, Harry was standing in the Great Hall of Potter Manor where, to his surprise, several aurors were on hand to check invitations and verify identities. Also waiting for him were Professor Snape, Hestia, Artie and a second woman. The last three wore slightly anachronistic but still appropriate clothing, but Harry was amused to see that for Snape, "Muggle semi-formal" consisted of the same jet-black robes he wore every day at school.

"Good morning and happy birthday to you both!" said Artie jovially to Harry and Neville. "Harry, I don't believe you've met my wife, Elizabeth." A middle-aged woman with black hair and a warm kindly face stepped forward.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. Especially you, Harry. I know from what he's told me that Artie is quite fond of you."

"Thank you, Madame Podmore," said Harry. "The feeling is mutual."

"Oh, please, call me Elizabeth. I know it's short notice, but I was hoping that after this affair is over, you three might come by our house for dinner."

Harry looked back at Lady Augusta who nodded. "We'd be delighted Elizabeth."

Then, Artie stepped forward, bowed and kissed Lady Augusta's hand before turning back to Harry. "Your parents have prepared a light breakfast in the dining room. Most of the guests won't arrive before noon, but a few of their closer friends are already here. I believe they'd like to show

you around the grounds before too many people arrive arrive."

Harry nodded at that. He found himself strangely nervous. The last time he'd interacted with the rest of his family, it was when he served them all with legal papers in front of Dumbledore's office. The time before that was when he was still a baby. Reflexively, he started going over various Occlumency exercises in his head. It wouldn't do to get emotional here in enemy territory.

The formal dining hall had a table big enough to seat twenty, which was why the Potters rarely used it except for formal meals. When Harry and his group arrived, his parents and brother were already there. James and Lily were visibly nervous, while Jim seemed aloof. Also present was a doughy man with beady eyes who Artie introduced as Peter Pettigrew, James's own lawyer. Although Pettigrew gave his best shot at a charming first impression, Harry took an immediate and instinctive dislike to him. Everyone took a seat, and after a moment of uncomfortable silence, James finally spoke.

"I would like to begin, if I may, with an apology." James paused to take a deep breath. "Harry, my conduct for the past year has been ... reprehensible. I am deeply sorry for the circumstances that led to your placement with Petunia and Vernon who we now know were completely unfit guardians. I will still say that, at the time, we genuinely believed that you were a squib and that placement with Muggles was advisable because of the potential danger of Death Eaters trying to get to Jim through you. That said, we certainly should have been much more proactive in making sure you were looked after properly. More importantly, the Howler I sent you after your Sorting was completely indefensible. All I can say is that, frankly, I have had a



lifelong bias against Slytherin House that was only made worse during the War when the Death Eaters recruited from that House almost to the exclusion of the other three. They weren't all Slytherins, of course, and after all these years, it is still sobering to think that my best friend and a fellow Gryffindor, Sirius Black, was secretly one of You-Know-Who's strongest supporters. But that was over a decade ago, and I need to accept that Slytherin today is not what it was back then. You and your friends have courageously fought directly against You-Know-Who and helped Jim to drive him away even though you had every reason to be bitter enough to leave Jim to his fate. And I thank you for that from the bottom of my heart." He hesitated once more. "In light of everything that's happened, do you see any possibility of forgiving us and reuniting with our family?"

Harry was quiet for a moment. "I suppose that would depend. Do you see a way to accept me as your Heir Presumptive and eventually your Heir Apparent despite my Sorting?"

James swallowed. "Yes. Yes I do."

Harry stared at him for a long time. James Potter wasn't as easy to read as the typical Gryffindor from school, but he was ultimately still a Gryffindor. Frankly, Harry wasn't sure he was being entirely sincere, but if not, at least he was making the effort to fake it. As a Slytherin, he could respect that at least.

"Then perhaps," said Harry slowly, "some token of good faith might be in order? For example, I gather there's an Heir's ring somewhere?"

Before James could say anything, Peter spoke up.

"Unfortunately, the ring was lost on the night You-Know-Who attacked the house at Godric's Hollow. James has commissioned a new Heir's ring, but the enchantments are very high level and anyway it will have to be certified by the Wizengamot. We estimate that a new ring will be available sometime next year."

"What was it doing at Godric's Hollow instead of in the Potter vault?" asked Snape sharply.

James took a second to suppress his annoyance at being interrogated by his old school rival. "I still *was* the Heir when we moved there, Severus. That house was a wedding gift from my parents. I took the Lord's ring after my father died, but I was still in mourning and, as the saying goes, I was 'unwilling to put away childish things' by putting away my Heir's ring and moving back into the Manor. Besides, a Fidelius on the Manor would not have worked properly anyway because of its size and extensive ward scheme, so we still thought Godric's Hollow was safer. Obviously, we were wrong. Anyway, on Halloween Night 1981, the Heir's ring was sitting in a dresser drawer in the nursery Harry shared with Jim. Both the dresser and that whole room were destroyed in the backlash, and the ring wasn't found among the wreckage."

Harry stared at James and Peter with his eyes narrowed while he tried to guess whether they were lying about the ring and, if so, to what purpose. Then, Hestia spoke up.

"Let's pass over the ring for right now. What sort of relationship do you propose to have with Harry going forward in light of everything that's happened? Are you now saying that you want him living here at Potter Manor?"

Because that's clearly been off the table so far on your part, and at the moment, I think Harry feels the same."

"At some point," said James, "I hope Harry will consider moving back here, but I understand if he feels uncomfortable with that. At the moment, the injunction he got effectively prevents him from living here unless ... well, unless Severus moves in along with him which frankly I don't see happening." Snape's derisive snort registered his agreement. "But right now, Harry, you're living with Augusta Longbottom who I find completely acceptable as an acting guardian if she is willing to fulfill that role. In the meantime, I hope that you will at least consider coming to visit us and perhaps even stay over for Christmas holidays. I know we got off on the wrong foot before and I blame myself entirely for that. But I really do want to get the chance to know my Heir. I hope that we can start with that today."

Harry simply nodded. "Speaking of today, what's the schedule? I know it's a joint birthday party, but up until this year, it was just 'The Boy-Who-Lived's Birthday Party' and also a major social event. Where will I be fitting in?"

Peter spoke up. "The story we'll be presenting to guests and to the press is basically the truth. That you were wrongly identified as a squib in infancy and your parents sought to place you with Muggle relatives for your own health and safety. That your wizarding heritage eventually manifested and you received a Hogwarts letter. That you are still in the process of acclimating to wizarding culture and so did not wish to immediately move back in with your family. While your Sorting was a bit of a shock, you and your father have worked past that, and we ask that the media respect your privacy during this time of transition etcetera etcetera."

Harry's eyes widened. "And that's what you consider ... 'basically the truth'?"

Peter shrugged. "For media purposes, anyway."

"Speaking of which," said Jim, who had been silent up to now, "is Harry talking to any reporters today? The press conference is at eleven. Are you sending him into the meat grinder on his first day back?" Even James and Lily looked at Jim in surprise. There was a harshness to his remarks that he'd never displayed in the past when it came to dealing with the media.

"You have a press conference scheduled on your birthday?" asked Harry in surprise. Lady Augusta had mentioned the possibility, but he'd still thought the idea absurd until now.

"From time to time," Jim said with surprising bitterness, "the Boy-Who-Lived is expected to put on a show for his adoring fans. It's not all about fighting dark lords ... *unfortunately*." Jim muttered the last word almost too softly for Harry to hear.

## Chapter End Notes

Details regarding Heir's rings will be covered in later chapters.

# The Birthday Party (Pt 1)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 8: The Birthday Party (Pt. 1)

After breakfast, the Potters gave Harry and the Longbottoms a tour of Potter Manor while they waited for the press to arrive. As it happened, the adults on both sides thought it best that Harry attend the "availability" but not participate unless one of the interviewers pushed for it. Today, the members of the press included two reporters from *The Prophet* (one of whom was the infamous gossip columnist Rita Skeeter) plus a photographer; Xenophilius Lovegood, owner and sole employee for *The Quibbler*, which was either a satirical magazine or the ravings of a madman depending on who you asked; a reporter for the Wizing Wireless; *three* reporters from *Teen Witch Weekly*; plus another five from various foreign papers. When the time came, Harry accompanied the Potters to the parlor where the press availability was to be held, but he sat in the back and did little except smile winningly while James Potter provided an edited but plausible explanation of why no one had ever heard of him before. James also asked the assembled journalists to "respect Harry's privacy and that of the family during this challenging time."

Despite that admonition, Harry actually did get a few questions, but mostly innocuous ones. "*How are you adapting to wizarding life?*" "*What was life like in the Muggle world?*" A question from *Teen Witch Weekly* about what kind of hair-care products he favored (he name-checked Lavender Brown as having introduced him to

Sleekeazy). Finally, a pinched-face woman in a horrific leopard-print outfit and pince-nez glasses who identified herself as Rita Skeeter asked about rumors that James had sent him a Howler on the first morning of classes out of anger over his Slytherin Sorting. James started to answer, but Harry interrupted with an answer of his own.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Miss Skeeter, the Howler was more than a rumor, seeing as how it went off in front of several hundred of my fellow students. However, that was nearly a year ago, and my father and I have worked diligently to move past it and rebuild our relationship." Harry turned towards James and smiled at him, and to his relief, the man at least had the good sense to smile back in front of the reporters. "While it was somewhat embarrassing at the time, I do understand that it was a great shock to everyone for me to be the first Slytherin Potter in over 200 years or more. Indeed, apparently the first Potter to go to *any* House other than Gryffindor in that time. However, my father has profusely apologized for sending it, I have accepted his apology, and together we've moved on. My goal now is to show the entire world that there's nothing wrong with being a Slytherin Potter. That I can uphold my family's traditions of honor and courage despite personally being more cunning than brave. And most importantly, that Slytherin House has more to offer Wizarding Britain than just the bigoted lackeys of a failed dark lord who was destroyed by my brother more than a decade ago."

"Well said, sir! Well said indeed!" exclaimed Xeno Lovegood, who started applauding, and several other reporters, after a moment of confusion, joined in. For her part, Skeeter just looked at Harry speculatively before writing something down on her pad. Harry wasn't sure, but he also thought

she gave a quick glance in the direction of James and Peter while she was writing.

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Soon after, the press conference ended with the remaining questions focused on how much money the Potters expected to haul in today and what were some of their proposed projects for the Charitable Trust. Afterwards, the group moved to the front lawn of the estate, where buffet tables were set up on one side (decorated in Gryffindor colors, naturally) with smaller tables arranged for people to sit and eat in the middle. On the opposite side was a single long table already covered in gifts from Jim's adoring fans, as well as from people who merely found it politically or socially expedient to act like Jim's adoring fans. Ginny was among the throng already surrounding Jim, as was a hyperactive young girl who looked like a slightly smaller Daphne Greengrass. There was another girl there with blonde hair and big blue eyes who caught Harry's attention, mainly because she kept looking back and forth between Jim and Harry with an increasingly perturbed expression. Beyond that group, James Potter was shaking hands with a group of older and more socially important well-wishers. Harry recognized Dumbledore, of course, along with Minister Cornelius Fudge, DMLE Director Amelia Bones, and Chief Auror Rufus Scrimgeour. Dumbledore noticed Harry looking in their direction, and he smiled and raised a glass of punch in salute. Harry nodded back at him respectfully.

During the press conference, James had mentioned that this year's event was expected to bring in over 20,000 galleons for charity. As he took in the spectacle, Harry remembered his own previous birthdays and once more fought down feelings of bitterness. True, the past was past, and there was nothing to be done about it, but it still

gnawed at him at times like this. Before James Potter showed up in Little Whinging the year before, it was the practice of the Dursleys to have him make breakfast on the morning of July 31st and then lock him in the cupboard all day while they left and did something enjoyable outside without him. When they returned, they'd all make a point of telling him how much fun they'd had. Then, they'd give him a gift. One year, it had been a coat hanger; another, a piece of string Dudley had found. For a moment, Harry wondered which was worse: to never have one's birthday celebrated at all except as a cruel joke or to have it coopted every year as a public relations event venerating a cultural myth instead of an actual human being. He concluded that even as staged and meaningless as the Boy-Who-Lived's Birthday Gala was, Jim still had the better end of the deal.

At 12:15 on the dot, Jim made a short and well-delivered speech welcoming everyone to the party, which was apparently bigger than in years previous due to the presence of a number of guest who would not have been invited in years past – mostly friends of Harry's, but also people like Arthur and Molly Weasley who did not normally travel in the Potters' social circles. Jim also introduced Harry to the assembled crowd, but mercifully, the older twin wasn't asked to give a speech himself.

After Jim finished, Harry made the rounds of guests, some of whom he knew quite well but most of whom he didn't know at all. He was pleased to note that everyone he'd invited had shown up, even if James, Jim and other Gryffindor types were giving some of his guests the stink-eye. Their loss, he supposed. He made a point of introducing himself to Scrimgeour, perhaps the highest-ranking official in the British wizarding government who was also a Slytherin alumnus. The older man shook his hand cordially and related the "*hilarious*" tale of the Howler Lily



had sent to James that went off in the main office of the DMLE. Harry noted that the Scrimgeour, who had a reputation for being secretive and taciturn, today made a point of telling the story loudly enough for everyone (including James) to hear from across the yard. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he could hear his father's teeth grinding from forty feet away.

Harry also took the opportunity to introduce Scrimgeour to Marcus Flint who happened to be walking by. Since his arrival, Flint had looked as nervous as a cat in a rabid dog factory, but he'd pulled himself together and made a decent impression on the Chief Auror. To Marcus's surprise, Scrimgeour had remembered his great-grandfather, Caractacus Flint, the same one who had been Prince of Slytherin in the 1870's, though there was no hint that Scrimgeour himself was aware of that title. Caractacus had been a legendary senior auror during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and he'd been Scrimgeour's mentor in his first days out of the academy before dying heroically in Spain in 1938 fighting against fascist wizards loyal to Grindelwald. The leonine auror encouraged Flint to keep his grades up and, if they were satisfactory, to come and see him after graduation. Then, he shook Harry's hand and moved on to other guests.

"Did Rufus Scrimgeour just ask me to come and see him after graduation?" Flint asked with a slight tremor in his voice.

"Yes. Conditional on good grades, of course," replied Harry as he took a sip of punch.

"I nearly threw up on his shoes."

"I'm glad you didn't. You never have a second chance to make a good first impression. By the way, how *are* your grades?"

Marcus exhaled. "I retook my Potions and Transfiguration OWLS last week. Those were the two I flunked the first time. I have another week before I get my results back, and I'm a complete wreck over it. How's your Quidditch training coming?"

"I played a pickup game against Cedric Diggory. He beat me to 7-4."

Marcus looked at him in surprise. "That's actually not bad for your level of experience. We might have just found our new Seeker."

Harry shrugged. "Actually, I think I prefer Chaser. Naturally, though, I'll take whatever position the Captain offers me."

The other boy rolled his eyes. "For Merlin's sake, Potter, stop trying to suck up to me. I'm already so deep in your pocket, I feel like yesterday's handkerchief." Harry laughed and then directed Flint's attention towards Ludo Bagman, the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, since professional Quidditch was Marcus's fallback plan if he didn't have the grades for a Ministry job.

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After separating from Marcus, Harry made the rounds and eventually introduced himself to the parents of Justin Finch-Fletchley, mainly as an experiment. Both the elder Finch-Fletchleys were polite (naturally, as they were well-bred and it was an important social setting), but now that he knew what to look for, Harry could sense the barely concealed disdain that both of the Muggles had developed

for him after just a few minutes. Harry quickly moved on, but he could hear Justin behind him whispering angrily to his parents about their rudeness. Harry shook his head sadly and headed for the punch bowl.

Along the way, Harry crossed paths with two more Housemates: Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis. After a year in the same House, the two were still a bit of a mystery to Harry. Individually, he thought he had them pegged: Daphne, the aloof raven-haired beauty who carried herself like a forgotten member of the House of Windsor; and Tracey, whose "ditzy blonde" persona was a calculated performance that caused less astute Slytherins to ignore her as a threat. The *mystery* was how the Heir Presumptive of House Greengrass and a Halfblood being raised by her Muggle single mom were already best friends long before arriving at Hogwarts, not to mention why Lord and Lady Greengrass would treat the apparently unrelated Halfblood practically like a third daughter.

"Thanks for the invitation, Potter, unexpected as it was," said Tracey.

"Well, there's safety in numbers, so I invited every Slytherin in my class who I didn't think was an aspiring Death Eater. Don't feel like you're obligated to me or anything over it."

"Don't be stupid, Potter," snapped Daphne. "You invited my family to the social event of the season, one my mother has wanted to come to for as long as I can remember. Of course you think we both now owe you an obligation."

He sighed in a long-suffering manner. "You wound me, Greengrass. But then, you're both good at that. Lots of people still refuse to speak to me on a first-name basis, but you two are the only ones who invited me to use your first

names and then *changed your minds* for some frivolous reason."

"It wasn't *frivolous*, Potter," said Tracey angrily. Daphne tried to interrupt her, but she ignored her friend. "Draco and Pansy put pressure on Daphne to break ties with you. They threatened to make things difficult for me in the house because of ... you know." And he did – Tracey's status in the House was at that time even more precarious than his own. They were both Halfbloods, but he at least was the Potter heir. No one knew anything about Tracey's parentage except that her mother was a Muggle who had a liaison with an unidentified wizard.

"Well," said Harry, "Draco is no longer a concern of mine. Actually, he never was a concern of mine, but now he's ... I don't know. Is there such a thing as anti-concern? Anyway, I promise you both that you owe me no obligation for your invitation to this party." He smiled. "Of course, an invitation to the Potter New Year's Eve Ball is another matter."

Daphne's eyes lit up and then narrowed dangerously. "What do you want in exchange?" she practically hissed with eagerness.

"Nothing specific right now. Let's just say you'll owe me a favor to be repaid later ... Daphne."

"If you don't want anything, why did you invite us in the first place? Just to get on a first name basis?"

"Don't be silly. Your sister Astoria already told me I could use *her* first name, and after ten minutes of chatting, your mother adores me. I think she's looking for a son-in-law... not that I'm remotely interested in that right now, but give it three or four years and, eh, we'll see what develops. To answer your question, Daphne, I invited your family

because I wanted to meet your father. And also to make sure your father met some other people."

Daphne looked around suspiciously and saw her father at a table some distance away talking animatedly with Augusta Longbottom and Madanapala Patil. "What are you scheming, Potter?"

"Not scheming, Daphne. Just ... building bridges. Your family is in the import-export business. The Longbottoms have magical plant nurseries and farms on three continents. The Patils have mining operations across India and Southeast Asia. If the three families pooled their resources, they could break the near-monopoly on imported potions supplies currently maintained by the Selwyn family. And for pity's sake, call me Harry."

Tracey gave him a concerned look. "The Selwyns are a powerful family, Pott- ... Harry. And they'll make dangerous enemies."

"Good. That's the only kind worth having," Harry said with a wink. Then, he gave a slight bow and left the two girls behind to whisper furiously about what he'd said. Tracey was right, of course. The Selwyns were powerful and dangerous. They were also flagrant supporters of Voldemort who had evaded prosecution with an Imperius claim even flimsier than Lucius Malfoy's and a much bigger pot of bribes. As far as Harry was concerned, it might be Jim's job to "fight the bad guys" with ridiculous heroics, but that wouldn't stop Harry from doing what preemptive damage he could before it ever got to that point. He had money, he had skilled political and legal advisers, he had the backing of House Longbottom, and in a few years, he'd have the status of Heir Apparent to House Potter. And he was of the strong opinion that the Death Eaters would be a

lot less fearsome during the next War if they started off from a position of bankruptcy.

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About half an hour later, Harry was standing by the punch bowl watching his brother still standing among a crowd of boys and girls. Jim's full attention was on Cedric Diggory, who was apparently talking about some Seeker tricks he'd picked up at a training camp. Neville, Ron and a few other boys were also listening intently, as was Ginny, but the other dozen or so girls clustered around them mostly seemed content to bask in the presence of the Boy-Who-Lived. In particular, Lavender Brown was standing at Jim's side in a somewhat proprietary manner. Gathered around were Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Astoria Greengrass, the pale blonde girl who Harry had identified as Luna Lovegood, Parvati Patil, and several others he didn't know.

Padma Patil was *not* among Jim's groupies, however – Harry had noticed her across the lawn, sitting at a table with Olivia Kolumbiko, Margaret Bulstrode (Marcus's opposite number among the Slytherin Seventh Year Prefects) and Percy Weasley. Presumably, Padma was grilling the three about strategies for becoming a prefect. He'd been surprised the previous Christmas when Percy had mentioned that he thought Olivia should have been Head Girl. The older boy almost seemed to have a crush on the aloof Slytherin prefect. Harry was scanning the crowd looking for Hermione when she came up right behind him and said his name, causing him to jump and spill some punch.

"Gah! Don't do that! I swear, Jim Potter has an invisibility cloak and he's not as stealthy as you are!"

Hermione laughed. "Speaking of Jim, have you had a chance to talk with him yet?"

"Yes, we had a lovely family reunion when I arrived this morning," he replied.

"No, I mean one-on-one." Harry noticed that his friend had grown serious.

"Not yet. I wasn't really planning on one either. Why do you ask?"

She hesitated and then leaned in so they wouldn't be overheard. "He pulled me aside earlier to talk to me in private. He wanted to apologize for arguing with me last September and calling me a 'Mudblood.'"

Harry sniffed. "Really?! He's *just now* apologizing for that?!"

"Shh," hissed Hermione, not wanting to make a scene. "He apologized the day after it happened, but it was the sort of mealy-mouthed apology one might expect from a sulking boy whose parents made him give it. The apology he gave today seemed sincere. A bit *too* sincere, actually."

"How can an apology seem *too* sincere?" Harry asked in confusion.

Hermione hesitated. "Maybe I'm just being overly dramatic but from the way he talked ... it felt like ... well, like the sort of apology you might give to someone you felt you'd wronged and wanted to make amends to while you were in the process of putting your final affairs in order."

Surprised at that morbid description, Harry looked back towards Jim. Although it was too far away to hear clearly, it

seemed like Cedric must have mentioned their Quidditch match at the Burrow. Harry noticed Cedric pointing at a blushing Ginny and then towards him. Jim looked over in his direction and frowned. Apparently, he was not pleased at the thought of his twin playing Quidditch for Slytherin. Suppressing a smirk, Harry headed over to the group of children along with Hermione. As he approached, the Lovegood girl looked back and forth between the two of them with a slightly nauseous expression. Finally, she focused her full attention on Jim, literally turning her body so she couldn't see Harry at all. Jim could still see Harry's approach, and his expression darkened.

"Are you feeling okay today, Jim?" Luna suddenly asked with some concern. "The wrackspurts and fury-flies in your head have all suddenly grown unusually aggressive." Several of the people around the girl groaned or rolled their eyes. Jim was one of them.

"Luna, I'm fine. And I don't have wrackspurts in my head because, as I've said a dozen times, *they don't exist*."

"Well, if you don't have wrackspurts in your head, silly, why did you feel the need to tighten down your Boy-Who-Lived mask before the party even started?"

Lavender made a face and muttered the word "Looney" under her breath. Luna didn't seem to hear it, but Ginny did, and she narrowed her eyes at the other girl menacingly.

"Luna," said Jim in annoyance, "I don't know what the heck that is supposed to mean, and I still say there's no such thing as wrackspurts. Or nargles. Or Crumple-Horned ... whatever they are."

"Snorkacks," Luna said cheerfully.



"Which. Still. Don't. Exist!" snapped Jim. "Although if wrackspurts can explain the headache you're giving me right now, maybe there's something to them." He turned towards Harry who had walked up to stand beside him. "But it's more likely my headache is simply because I sensed my brother's approach. What do you want, Harry?"

"To wish a happy birthday to my little brother?" Harry said smugly. "That's what this shindig is for, I suppose. Also, I wanted to introduce myself to this charming young woman and maybe hear more about ... rocksports and niggles? Harry Potter, at your service." He held out his hand towards Luna, but at this point, the girl seemed almost in shock as she looked back and forth between the Potter Twins in mounting horror. Then, she drew a breath as if to scream before abruptly fainting. Only Jim's Seeker reflexes allowed him to catch the girl before she collapsed, and he lowered her carefully to the ground before sending Neville and Cedric off to look for the girl's father.

Harry and Hermione knelt next to the stricken girl. "Okay, whatever that was, I didn't do it," Harry said.

"Shush, you," said Hermione as she patted the semiconscious Luna's hand. The girl stirred. Then, she suddenly leaned forward and began whispering into a surprised Hermione's ear.

At that point, one of the other girls who Harry didn't know spoke up in a snotty voice. "Humph. Well, that's Looney Lovegood for you! Always making a scene of some kind."

"Be nice, Marietta," warned Ginny in a low but surprisingly dangerous voice.

"Ginny, dear, I know you haven't had the chance to make very many friends living out in the sticks in Ottery St.

Catchpole, but you're starting Hogwarts in a month, and you can do better for yourself than Looney Lovegood."

Ginny started to retort, but before she could, Harry stood and moved towards the other girl excitedly. "Hey, I know *you*! I should have recognized you from the start! You must be Vincent Crabbe's little sister. He's told me *so much* about you! Harry Potter, delighted to meet you!" He held out his hand eagerly as if waiting for her to produce her own for a gentleman's kiss. The girl looked back at him in horror.

"My *name* is Marietta Edgecombe, and I am *not* related to Vincent Crabbe in any way!" she sniffed angrily.

"*Really?*" asked Harry in apparent surprise. "But the resemblance is just so ... *uncanny*!"

Marietta's eyes flashed furiously, and then she turned and stormed away, followed by several of the other girls who Harry neither knew nor cared about. Jim turned towards Harry in annoyance.

"What was that about? She doesn't look anything like Crabbe."

"I know, Little Brother, but this is a formal garden party. I couldn't very well come right out and *say* that I thought she was a boorish little snob, now could I?" Behind him, Ginny openly laughed at that. Ron gave her an angry look but said nothing.

At that point, Xeno Lovegood ran up and helped his daughter to her feet. Luna still seemed distraught and actively avoided looking at either of the Potter Twins. She whispered something to her father who turned towards Jim. "I do apologize, Mr. Potter, for all this drama. I think my

Luna has had enough excitement for one day. I'd best get her home." Then, he led the still shaken girl away.

Jim shook his head. "Marietta was right about one thing. She does like to cause a scene."

Ginny turned towards him angrily. "That's not fair, Jim. You know it hasn't been that long since her mother died! And right in front of her, no less!"

Jim blushed, while Ron stepped forward. "Ginny, that's enough. We're guests here."

"Yes," said Harry with asperity. "Specifically, Ginny is *my* guest to this party, seeing as how Jim only invited you and the Twins. And personally, I'm not at all offended by Ginny standing up for her friend."

Jim held up a hand to stop Ron from responding. Then, he looked at Ginny who seemed to be seeing the Boy-Who-Lived in a new light. "Ginny, I'm sorry if you were offended by what I said about Luna. And I'm sorry for her loss. I'm just a bit stressed out. It's been a long day, and it will be a while before I'm done. Everybody, if you'll excuse me, I need to go freshen up a bit. In about half an hour, we'll be opening the gifts. I'll see you all then." With that, Jim quickly left the group. Ron gave Harry an angry glare and then wandered off to scarf some more appetizers. Harry shrugged. His relationship with Ron had apparently moved past overt hostility, but that didn't mean he cared very much about the boy's feelings. Instead, he moved over to Hermione.

"What was that she whispered to you?"

"Well, it was a bit odd, even for wizards. According to her, it seems that everyone has tiny little invisible firefly creatures

called nargles which float around our heads and infest the brains of anyone with whom we interact and successfully confuse in some manner. But that's not the odd bit."

"It's ... not?" said Harry, who thought the idea of nargles was quite odd indeed. Hermione just turned to look at him with an peculiar expression.

"No, the odd bit, assuming that what she said wasn't complete nonsense, is that the nargles that float around your head and the ones that float around Jim's head don't like each other, and when you get too close to one another, they go into a cannibalistic frenzy and start eating one another."

Harry blinked. "Ooookay, you're right. I guess that *is* the odd bit." As he spoke, Harry glanced over Hermione's shoulder and noticed Blaise standing alone near the door to the manor house aggressively not looking in his direction in a manner that would alert any competent Slytherin to the fact that he urgently wanted to talk. "*There are times,*" he thought to himself, "*when the Slytherin need for misdirection is just ... tiring.*"

"Would you excuse me for a minute, Hermione," he said. "Blaise is over there pretending he doesn't want to speak to me. I better go see what he doesn't want me for."

Hermione shook her head in amusement. "Slytherins," she said.

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Five minutes later, Jim was in a ground floor bathroom slashing some water on his face. He'd tried to do something with his unmanageable hair and for once was jealous of Harry's styling skills. Briefly, he thought about getting Lavender to do a "make-over" on him as she and Parvati

had done for his brother. Then, he shook his head. At this point, the last thing he wanted was to be accused of following his Slytherin twin's lead even on something as inconsequential as hair style. As Jim studied his own face in the mirror, he shuddered briefly and wondered if there was anyone else capable of seeing the emotions he saw reflected in his own eyes. Probably not. People saw what they wanted to see, and everyone wanted to see him as the Chosen One, the Savior of the Wizarding World, instead of what he was: a drowning twelve-year-old boy. "*Heh. Or maybe that's just the wrackspurts talking,*" Jim said to himself with a snort as he thought back over his strange encounter with Luna. Then again, all of his encounters with Luna were strange ones, so that was nothing new. The boy took a deep breath and exited the bathroom. Then, he immediately jumped when someone called out his name. He quickly relaxed, though, as it was one of the few people in the world he still trusted completely.

"Oh, hey Uncle Pete," Jim said to his godfather, Peter Pettigrew.

"Are you okay, son? You seem ... upset. Is it because *he's* here?"

"No, it's okay. Like it or not, this is Harry's birthday too, and he deserves to be here."

Peter snorted softly at Jim's sentimentality, as if he didn't believe Harry deserved to share anything at all with Jim. "Well, whatever happens, always remember that your parents love you. And while your dad may have some ... paternal obligations towards Harry, I'll always have my godfatherly obligations to you and that will never change. Got it?"

The boy smiled. "Sure thing, Uncle Pete."

With that, Peter looked around carefully to make sure they were alone. "And speaking of which, since I've got you here away from everybody, I have something for you. Your '*official*' gift is out on the table, but I wanted you to have something a bit more personal. One of my more disreputable clients told me where to find it in Knockturn Alley. *Do not* let *anyone* know I gave it to you, okay?" Jim was surprised by his Uncle Pete's forcefulness and nodded seriously. From inside his coat, Pettigrew produced a small and rather battered-looking pocketbook bound in red leather. "Hide this away when you're not reading it and don't get caught with it, or neither of us will ever hear the end of it."

The front cover was blank, but when Jim opened the book up to look at the title page, he gasped. It was **Occlumency: A Beginner's Guide**, with the author identified only as "*Nemo*." The boy looked up at his godfather with a delighted and grateful smile. "Oh my ... wow. Thank you so much for this, Uncle Pete. I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. *Really*. Say absolutely nothing! Your mom is scary when she gets angry, and anyway, I could get into a lot of trouble for giving this to a minor, but I know how much you want to learn this. *Please* be careful with it, though. You'll be entirely self-taught, so go slow. The guy I got it from said to be sure you've mastered the exercises in each chapter before you move on to the next one."

"I will, I promise. And I won't tell a soul where it came from." Impulsively, he stepped forward and hugged the man. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Uncle Pete."

"Hush, now. That's what godfathers are for – to indulge their godsons. Now go and hide that and then get ready to open your presents. I'm eager to see what sort of cool swag you've gotten this year that your parents will fob off on some unworthy orphans."

Jim laughed and ran up the stairs with his new book. Peter watched after him with an indulgent smile and then took a sip from his punch glass. To be honest, he really was looking forward to the ceremonial opening of the Boy-Who-Lived's birthday presents. Well, one present, anyway. This annual Birthday Celebration had become a beloved tradition in Wizarding Britain, but Pettigrew suspected that today's festivities would be one for the history books.

## Chapter End Notes

AN: The Harry Potter Wiki is vague about what year Marietta Edgecombe was in beyond the fact that she was friends with Cho Chang and is therefore usually presumed to be a year ahead of Harry. However, it's possible that she was Sorted after that and anyway there's a huge lack of characters in Ginny's year, so I made the authorial decision to say that she gets Sorted in 1992. For the same reason, Astoria Greengrass will get Sorted this year as well, even though there's a fanon consensus that she didn't get Sorted until 1993.

# The Birthday Party (Pt 2)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 9 - The Birthday Party (Pt. 2)

*"Would you excuse me for a minute, Hermione," he said.  
"Blaise is over there pretending he doesn't want to speak to me. I better go see what he doesn't want me for."*

*Hermione shook her head in amusement. "Slytherins," she said.*

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Ignoring Hermione's jibe, Harry made his way towards the house. When he got within twenty feet of Blaise, the other boy turned and walked through the front door into Potter Manor without giving any sign he'd even see Harry. With an annoyed sigh, Harry followed. Once inside, he found Blaise nonchalantly leaning against a wall next to the door leading to the billiard room.

"What?" said Harry irritably. "You're being all cloak-and-daggery. What gives?"

"First of all, daggery isn't a word. Second, my mom wants to speak with you. She's waiting in there." He nodded towards the door.

"Yeah, well, daggery *should* be a word in any world that has *you* in it. And why are you both being so mysterious? She's had *two hours* to come and speak to me and hasn't bothered. I did notice, however, that she found time to meet every eligible bachelor here, plus half the prominent



married men, and to show each of them just enough interest to make all their girlfriends and wives jealous."

Blaise shrugged. "Everyone needs a hobby. Anyway, she planned on meeting with you later after the crowd thinned, but something happened that made her decide that we need to leave. Like, soon."

"What?" asked Harry, now concerned.

Blaise looked around conspiratorially. "She had a cup of tea," he whispered.

Harry stared at Blaise with narrowed eyes. "Oh no. You're not doing that to *me*, Blaise Zabini. Confusing people with sudden non sequiturs is *my* gimmick. Your thing is floating around at the edge of everyone's awareness until you nail someone with a sarcastic remark."

Blaise snorted in amusement. "Yeah, it is, isn't it? But anyway, I'm quite serious. Mom's had Divination training. Real training, not that crap they offer at Hogwarts. And she says she saw a sign of impending danger in the leaves from the bottom of her teacup, so we're leaving early. But before we go, she wants to meet with you, so go in and talk to her. And be respectful. She's my mom *and* she's foreign nobility, so be *at least* as polite to her as you are to Molly Weasley."

Harry sniffed. "I am always respectful to elders not named Potter, Blaise, even the parents of people as annoying as you." And with that, Harry swept imperiously past his snickering friend into the billiard room. Inside, Serena Zabini sat in an overstuffed chair next to the window as she delicately sipped from a tea cup engraved with a golden "Z" crest.

"Countess Zabini, I presume. Or should I say Contessa Zabini?"

"Either is acceptable, *Signor* Potter," she said in a cultured Italian accent. "Or even Comtesse, I suppose. I am of Sicilian descent with dual Italian and British citizenship and am heiress by marriage to a landed estate in France. To be honest, I never truly know where I am until I hear myself being formally introduced. So let us simplify things. You may address me as Lady Serena."

Harry sat down in a matching chair across from the Countess. Between them was a coffee table which held a tea tray, complete with service for two. The tray, cups and teapot all bore the Zabini family crest: a stylized golden "Z" pierced vertically with a stiletto. He thought it somewhat odd that the Countess would have summoned her own personal tea set for this meeting but did not comment on it. She was a Pureblood, after all.

"As you wish, Lady Serena. Blaise said you wished to speak with me. Also something about tea leaves that I didn't quite follow."

"Ah yes. My Blaise. *Il mio Passerotto bello*. He has told me so much of you, Harry Potter. You have made quite an impression on him and on many others. I expect great things from you, *Signor* Potter. *But* – first and foremost, I am Blaise's mother, and I worry about him. Great people, often with only the best of intentions, frequently leave chaos and destruction in their wake, chaos and destruction that rain down upon those around them even as it leaves them largely unscathed. I worry, *Signor* Potter. I worry about the cost Blaise may pay in the future for your friendship. *Le streghe siciliani* have a saying: *Il destino è pagato nel sangue*. Destiny is paid for in blood."

As she spoke, the Countess poured a second cup of tea. "One lump or two," she said with a charming smile, as if she had not just been talking about chaos, destruction, and blood-soaked destinies.

Harry opened his mouth to respond with something sarcastic but caught himself. Then, he mentally rejected the next three progressively less sarcastic responses that quickly popped into his mind before finally settling for something boring but safe.

"One lump with lemon, please. Since you wished to meet with me but have not already forbidden Blaise from continuing our friendship, Lady Serena, there is obviously some way for me to reassure you that I will not bring any harm to your son. What would you ask of me?"

The Countess smiled approvingly at Harry's mannered response, as she handed him the cup of tea. Then, she opened an expensive-looking clutch purse and pulled out a deck of cards which she placed on the table between the two of them. "Shuffle the cards until you feel comfortable with them. Then, place them back on the table and cut them once." Harry looked down at the cards which appeared to be a rather worn Tarot deck.

"Is the deck magical, Lady Serena?" he asked cautiously.

"No more so than any other deck of cards in the proper hands, *Signor* Potter," she replied.

Harry took a sip of tea while he considered that cryptic response. Then, he put the cup and saucer on the table before gingerly reaching out for the deck to shuffle it.

"Blaise never mentioned any particular interest in Divination as a course of study. I do seem to recall he had little respect for our Divination professor at Hogwarts."

"Ahh, *Professoressa* Trelawney. An interesting woman. I consider her to be one of the most gifted seers of the current age. I also believe that she is a delusional and dangerously incompetent fraud. You may find, if you undertake a study of Divination, that the two descriptions are not mutually exclusive."

"How so?" Harry asked as he put the deck back on the table and cut the cards.

"*Le persone ignorante* believe that '*seers predict the future.*' *Sciocchezza!* A true seer is but a conduit. Magic itself predicts. Or more precisely, Magic declares an event that it wishes to see come to pass and then chooses a vessel through whom it shares that declaration with the world. Such a prophecy is not a mere prediction but a congeries of Fate and Magic. A True Prophecy *wants to come true*, much as a river wants to flow downhill. And just as the river wears away at any obstructions to smooth its path downstream, so too does a True Prophecy shape a thousand tiny random events to inexorably ensure its own resolution. Magic itself speaks through *Professoressa* Trelawney, as it has through others of her line, but the woman herself likely never even remembers any True Prophecies she utters. Instead, she relies upon divinatory tools for her deliberate attempts at scrying the future, like a child playing in a puddle who is oblivious to the raging sea behind her."

The Countess reached out and took the cards. Harry took another sip of tea as he considered the woman's words.

"You make True Prophecies seem almost ... sentient. And very powerful. Does free will truly exist for those caught up in such Prophecies?"

"You and I are as free as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Harry Potter. But if you read Genesis closely, you will

note that it never says how much time passed between the moment God forbade them from eating the fruit of the Forbidden Tree and the moment they defied that commandment. Was it a day? A month? A hundred years? However long it was, the Forbidden Tree was always there, waiting for them patiently. So it is with True Prophecies. You are free to choose, but the Prophecy itself has the power to shape the world around you so that your '*choice*' is inevitably influenced to comport with its terms. And even if you finally escape the Prophecy yourself, the Prophecy still endures, waiting for the next person who can satisfy its requirements. True prophecies are wild magic – '*la Magia Caotica*' as *le streghe siciliani* called it in the days before my ancestors were driven from Sicily. Indeed, outside of house elves and their kin, True Prophecies are the most powerful manifestations of wild magic tolerated in the Wizarding world."

Harry thought back to what Iris, Ted Tonks' house elf, had said about the Time Before when magic was not yet bound by wizards and witches. "Forgive my ignorance, Lady Serena, but ... what is '*wild magic*'?"

She took a long sip of tea before replying. "Something I will not discuss further here in the House of Potter," she said with a grave expression. "The British wizarding government sends murderers, terrorists, rapists and thieves to Azkaban to be tormented for years by Dementors. *I Maghi Selvaggi* – the Wild Magicians who wish to summon *la Magia Caotica*? And sometimes those merely *suspected* of doing so? *They* are all quietly flung through the Veil of Death without the public ever learning their names. Be careful who you speak to and what you ask in reference to ancient forbidden magic, *Signor Potter*."

Then, she smiled once more. "Happily, these cards are not so controversial. Through the act of wishing to know more of the future while working with divinatory tools, we invoke Magic within the boundaries set for it by our ancient forebears. In return, Magic shapes the cards or tea leaves or whichever tools we use in order to give us hints about the future rather than to outright shape that future for us. To modern wizards, such tools are no more frightening than wands or potions."

With that, she dealt nine cards off the top of the deck in a 3-by-3 pattern. Harry frowned. He didn't know anything about Tarot reading and had no idea what the various cards symbolized, but he assumed the "The Devil" in the bottom row was probably bad.

The Countess studied the cards for a few seconds. "*Interessante*. Seven of the nine cards are Major Arcana. Highly auspicious. Fate swirls about you like a gathering storm, *Signor* Potter, much as I expected."

Harry considered asking why that was "expected" but decided against it. He'd talk to Blaise at school about it. Then, she began pointing out the cards and describing their significance.

"The top row represents your past. The Seven of Swords, the Wheel reversed, and Justice reversed. Betrayal and deception. A powerful but hidden negative force acting against you to prevent you from achieving happiness or gaining friends. A lack of accountability on the part of those charged with protecting you."

Harry straightened up in surprise. He wasn't much of a believer in Divination, but she'd pegged his childhood pretty well.

"The middle row represents your current aims and their likelihood of success: The Hanged Man, the King of Wands, and the Chariot. A decision point approaches - a moment of choice which will fix the course of your life irrevocably for good or ill. I see that you remain focused on the problems surrounding your family. Or perhaps your inheritance? Understandable, but see that those issues do not blind you to other, more pressing concerns. You are a natural leader and honorable too, after your own fashion, forging alliances through sheer charisma with those those who by rights *should* be your enemies. There is a position of power which you seek, and you believe that self-control, subtlety, charm and an indomitable willpower will enable you to obtain it. You are most likely correct, but the journey will be more circuitous and more hazardous than you realize though perhaps not as long as you expect."

"Finally, the bottom row represents your future: The Emperor, the Devil reversed, and the Tower. A mentor approaches, one who may provoke distrust and fear within you and those around you. Despite that, he is the key that will free you from the shackles that bind you, and he will help you to achieve your destiny. Others will oppose you in your journey and seek your ruin. If you are clever, you can turn their treachery to your own advantage. If not, they will destroy you, and your destiny will remain unfulfilled. And ultimately? That destiny is to bring destruction."

Harry's eyes flashed up at that in alarm. "Destruction?" he whispered.

"That is not necessarily a bad thing, *Signor* Potter, for the Tower can also represent creative destruction. You have the potential to become a powerful force for change, but for good or ill I cannot say. In retrospect, I should have done a larger card spread, but I thought our time might be too

short. Still, I have enough for now. When the stars are once more in a propitious alignment, perhaps we may do this again and achieve a greater clarity." She scooped up the cards and put the deck back in her purse before looking up at Harry. "You have my permission to continue your friendship with *il mio Passerotto*, Harry Potter. Now, finish your tea, please."

Harry blinked in surprise at her abrupt conclusion. Then, he drained the cup before looking inside. The dregs were stuck to bottom of the cup in a vaguely spiral shape. He handed it back to the Countess who swirled the copy and then studied it carefully.

"Hmm, in light of other portents, there is definitely danger in the air. *Il Serpente Insidioso*. The Treacherous Serpent. The mark of the snake with its head pointed down. Perhaps someone of Slytherin House plots against you or your brother. Perhaps a literal snake or something merely suggestive of a snake. Beyond those clues, I see nothing except that the danger is imminent." She looked up at Harry. "This is why tasseomancy is such a poor tool. More often than not, the signs left in the tea leaves are perfectly clear but only when it is too late to be of use. Regardless, I think it best that Blaise and I depart immediately. As with your notorious brother, *la forza del destino* will shield you from harm, but not necessarily those you call friend. You will see my darling *Passarotto* at Hogwarts, but not before."

"You mean Blaise won't be riding the Hogwarts Express with us?"

The Countess studied him and then glanced down at his teacup again as if looking for confirmation. "No, that is not what I mean. Until next time, *Signor* Potter." And with that, the Countess Zabini banished her tea set and then rose and



left the room without another word, while Harry stared after her in befuddlement.

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Minutes later, he was outside heading swiftly towards Hermione. From across the yard, Jim spoke to the assembled crowd, his voice magically amplified, as he opened each gift and described its contents for the public. **"From the House of Longbottom - a Gringotts draft in the amount of 500 galleons."** There was a smattering of polite applause, but Hermione's attention was fixed on Harry's intense expression.

"Oh dear," she said. "Something ... Slytherin has happened, hasn't it?"

Harry stopped, distracted by her question. "What *exactly* do you *mean* by 'something Slytherin'?"

"Something generally alarming but also so arcane and overcomplicated that we mere Gryffindors can hardly begin to fathom it."

He stared at the girl for several seconds before shrugging. "Yeah, that's fair, I suppose. Anyway, I just spoke with Blaise's mom..."

"The Black Widow?! You didn't propose marriage, did you?"

**"From Zonko's Joke Shop - two dozen Fanged Frisbees,"** Jim announced to more applause.

"No, and stop that! She was very nice and gave no outward sign of being a serial killer. Anyway, she's apparently into Divination and read my tea leaves *and* did a Tarot reading for me. And her conclusion is that there's some sort of

danger around here. By the way, what does the word '*congeries*' mean?"

"A disorderly jumble. What sort of danger?"

**"*From cough the House of Malfoy - a Gringotts draft in the amount of 250 galleons,*"** Jim announced. The applause was still polite but noticeably subdued.

"Well ... it gets kind of vague at that point. Something to do with a snake. Which could mean that a Slytherin will attack someone. Or a Slytherin will *be* attacked by someone. Or maybe just that an actual snake will attack someone."

"So, you want to ... what? Tell your parents to evacuate the party because the Countess Zabini says some snake-themed event might occur?"

"I don't know!" he snapped irritably. "You're the intelligent and responsible Gryffindor. My instinct is to either run away or figure out how I can profit off whatever happens."

**"*From the Right Honorable Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic - a 1000-piece moving jigsaw puzzle depicting Hogwarts Castle and a Gringotts bank draft in the sum of 100 galleons,*"** Jim announced. More applause.

"Well, you know it's a danger but not what kind except that it's possibly Slytherin-related," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Have you considered the possibility that the prophecy is self-fulfilling and the danger is you causing a scene and making a fool of yourself in front of most of Wizzarding high society and that awful gossip monger for the *Daily Prophet*?"

He opened his mouth to speak and then exhaled. "Well, I hadn't *until now!* How are you not a Slytherin yourself if you can think of that possibility on the fly?"

Hermione sniffed. "I won't dignify that with a response. Anyway, assuming the worst, who among the guests do you think is the person most likely to want to harm or kill someone?"

***"From Peter Pettigrew, Esq., or as I like to call him, Uncle Pete - a handcrafted model of the Hogwarts Express,"*** Jim announced as he pulled out the toy to show it to the crowd. It did indeed resemble the Hogwarts Express: a bright red train engine (though with a gleaming golden cattle-catcher mounted on the front which the real engine lacked) with six attached passenger cars and a black caboose at the end. There was a smattering of applause interrupted by an excited exclamation from Pettigrew himself as he pushed his way through the crowd in a panic.

***"Toy Train?! It should be a new set of Quidditch gear! JIM! THAT'S NOT MY GIFT!"***

At that, Harry and Hermione froze, looked at one another, and quickly started moving towards Jim. James Potter, who was standing nearby, immediately drew his wand and yelled for Jim to put the train back in the box. But before the Boy-Who-Lived react, the train let out an unearthly whistle that sounded almost like an animal cry and started to writhe under its own power. Immediately, Jim screamed and dropped the train. Even from where he was, Harry could see blood pouring from a thick gash on Jim's wand hand. The train landed on the table, and its engine and first two cars lifted up off the ground as it let out another eerie whistle. The blood of the Boy-Who-Lived dripped from the razor-sharp cattle-catcher, and with a sinking feeling, Harry

noticed that in its current position, the toy train did indeed resemble a snake poised to strike. It reared up and prepared to attack Jim again, but before it could do so, James lashed out with a Knockback Jinx and hurled the train away while Pettigrew stepped in front of Jim protectively with his wand drawn. Unfortunately, the train landed in the middle of the crowd of guests, most of whom began screaming and panicking.

One of the younger and less experienced aurors on guard rushed forward and fired a stunner at the train. Naturally, it had no effect as the train was not a living thing and stunners don't affect automata. Angered nonetheless, the train let out another ear-splitting whistle and then slithered towards the auror with incredible speed. At the last second, it leapt up into the air and impacted the auror in his left thigh. To the horror of everyone around, the unholy thing easily pierced both clothing and skin and then quickly wriggled *inside* the auror's leg, burrowing through his body as the man screamed in terror and agony. Instantly, he fell to the ground and started convulsing, his stomach bulging grotesquely as the train writhed around inside him. Over the panicked screams of the guests, Harry could hear James Potter yelling for everyone to get inside the manor house. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear Lady Augusta and Neville calling his name but he couldn't see either of them. He also heard a few pops around him as those guests who brought their own portkeys fled to safety. While there were both anti-apparation wards and wards against unauthorized portkeys set up over the grounds, they did not block exit portkeys. Harry was relieved to see Daniel Greengrass summon his wife, his two daughters, and Tracey Davis to his side as he pulled out a three-foot long silken cord that served as a portkey big enough for five people. With a soft pop, they were safely away.

Then, Harry was distracted by a different sort of pop, a much louder and wetter one, as the stomach of the stricken auror expanded and then tore. Hermione screamed, as did several others closer to the auror who were spattered with blood, while Harry fought down the urge to vomit. Out of a rip in the dead man's stomach, the blood-soaked train rose up and gave another hideous whistle before leaping out in pursuit of more prey ... *followed by two more identical trains.*

"My God!" Hermione gasped out in horror. "That thing can replicate itself with each person it kills!"

Harry felt a firm hand on his shoulder. It was Marcus who was dragging Harry with one hand while loosening his tie with the other. "Then let's make sure we're not next on the menu! INTO THE HOUSE, YOU TWO!" And just in the nick of time as one of the trains immediately started slithering in Harry's direction. The three students ran, but Harry's foot caught on something and he fell. He looked back towards the approaching train in terror. Then, a figure stepped into the train's path. It was Rufus Scrimgeour.

"***PROTEGO!***" the Chief Auror cried out, and a shimmering golden shield materialized in the train's path. The tiny gleaming cattle-catcher on the front of the train engine slammed into the base of the shield which immediately started showing signs of cracking. Scrimgeour's eyes widened. "Merlin preserve us! It's got an orichalcum tip!" Then, he yelled out hoping to be heard over the general cacophony. "EVERYONE! IT'S GOT AN ORICHALCUM TIP! *IT CAN CUT THROUGH YOUR SHIELDS!*" Before he could say any more, his own shield spell shattered, and the train lunged forward towards the still prone Harry. Then, thrown off balance by the collapse of his shield spell, Scrimgeour stumbled between the two just as the train

leapt up and penetrated the man's right leg just above the ankle. He screamed and fell to the ground. As with the auror, the train started wriggling effortlessly up into the man's leg, but before it could get all the way in, Marcus darted forward holding his necktie in both hands like a garrote. Swiftly, he wrapped it twice around the train at the gap between the caboose and the last car and began pulling at the two ends of the tie with all his might.

"A necktie?" exclaimed Harry. "That thing can cut through bone like water! How will a necktie hold it?"

Marcus snarled through gritted teeth. "Acromantula silk! It's the only decent necktie I've ever owned that wasn't part of a damned school uniform! *Now stop asking bloody fool questions, Potter, and come help me!*"

Harry jumped up and grabbed the two ends of the ultra-durable neckwear just above where Flint was holding it. The two pulled and strained while Rufus Scrimgeour screamed in pain. Finally, the train came back out of the hole it had made. With a triumphant roar, Flint whirled around with the train still caught in his tie, and then he brought it down as hard as he could on a nearby table. The foul thing was still moving, so he jerked the train up and slammed it down again and again, cursing it in anger the whole time. A cry from Hermione pulled Harry's attention away from Flint's efforts to smash the infernal device.

"Harry! Give me your jacket!" Without even asking why, Harry pulled off his jacket and tossed it to the Gryffindor who immediately used it to plug the large hole in Scrimgeour's leg. The Chief Auror was already semiconscious and moaning in pain. Hermione's voice shook as she struggled to contain her own panic. "He's bleeding terribly. Understandable, seeing as how his fiit was nearly

amputated. We've got to get him to St. Mungo's. Help me get him up and in to the Floo."

"We don't have time for that," said Harry as he plopped down onto the ground and quickly began to pull his left shoe off. Inwardly, he marveled at his friend who'd had no Occlumency training of her own but was still able to resist panicking and instead apply First Aid to a horribly injured man. He also bit back his own anger that someone would put her into a situation where such poise was needed.

*"We're kids," he thought bitterly. "We shouldn't be in this situation, but somehow, it just keeps happening."*

"Why are you taking your shoes off?!" she exclaimed.

"Just one shoe and one sock, actually. Obviously, I can't reach my toe ring while I've still got a shoe and sock covering it. Think it through!"

By that point, he'd pulled off his left sock and removed from his pinky toe the tiny gold ring that Hestia Jones had procured for him a few days after his last encounter with the Dursleys. Quickly, he ripped open Scrimgeour's shirt and placed the ring on the old man's bare skin. "Give me your hand!" he commanded. Surprised, Hermione did as he asked, and Harry put her hand over the ring and his hand over hers. "Emergency Code Crimson!" he exclaimed, and with a pop, Hermione and Scrimgeour disappeared leaving a somewhat surprised and annoyed Harry behind. He shook his head and went to check on Marcus, who had finally slammed the train into the table enough times for it to stop moving.

"Where did you send them?"

"The emergency room lobby of St. Mungo's."

Marcus frowned at him. "Pfft! Not very Slytherin that. You've got a portkey, and you give it away to two other people?"

"Well, in my defense, I apparently can't judge weight limits very well. I had *expected* to go *with* them!"

Marcus snorted and then bent over to examine the wreckage of the train. "Hmm. The old geezer was right. There's a sharp pointy bit on the front of the train that looks like it's made of orichalcum."

"Ori-what?" Harry asked.

"Orichalcum. An alchemically-produced alloy of gold and some other metal, usually copper or aluminium but sometimes silver or platinum. Really hard to make. It's magic resistant, and if it's refined pure enough, it can slice through shield spells of all kinds. There was a question about it on the DADA OWLS."

As Marcus spoke, he and Harry looked to see that the general level of chaos was winding down. There were six more of the snake-trains - Harry blanched because that implied that at least two more people had died from their attacks - but all of them appeared to be contained in a floating sphere created by Headmaster Dumbledore. There were injured and crying people all about - Harry noticed James Potter tightly hugging a distraught Lily - but Snape, the Tonkses, and various aurors were administering First Aid as needed. Peter Pettigrew was attending to Jim, who sat on a table apparently in a state of shock while "Uncle Pete" gently wrapped a handkerchief around his bleeding hand and consoled him. Then, to his horror, Harry saw Hestia Jones staggering towards him, her dress covered in blood.



"Hestia! Come on, let's get you to a healer!"

"It's ... alright, Harry," she said in a dazed voice. "It's ... not my blood."

Harry froze. "What's happened, Hestia? Who got hurt?"

Hestia's face crumpled and she began to cry. "Those train things. They killed two aurors... and Elizabeth Podmore. Artie's wife is dead!"

Harry froze, horrified, as he recalled Lady Serena's warning about the price people might pay just for being his friend: *Destiny is paid for in blood.*

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Soon, more aurors and healers arrived. The remaining toy trains were neutralized and collected by the aurors for investigation. Although there were three fatalities, the injuries were otherwise only minor and mainly from people knocked down as the crowd panicked, and the healers also passed out Calming Draughts to all the traumatized survivors. However, Jim Potter now had a brand new curse scar on his wand hand to go along with the "V" on the side of his head. Rufus Scrimgeour would spend the next three days in the St. Mungo's ICU but would ultimately recover, though his leg injury would never heal completely due to the cursed nature of his wounds. He might continue on with a desk job of some kind, but his days as Chief Auror were likely numbered. Despite that, several of the aurors at the scene congratulated Marcus Flint and Harry Potter for their quick thinking that almost certainly saved their boss's life, and both boys accepted the praise humbly. Even James Potter got into the act, and Marcus was shocked when the famous Slytherin-hating senior auror shook his hand.

An analysis of the package in which the cursed train arrived showed that it was indeed the package that Peter Pettigrew had ordered from Quality Quidditch Supplies. However, there were faint traces of house elf magic found on the box. While foreign house elves couldn't enter the grounds of Potter Manor, it was already clear that a house elf could interfere with owl posts, which was apparently how the switch was made. The detection spells used could not distinguish any one elf from any other of its kind, but the manager at QQS stated that the store didn't use house elves, so it was assumed that the same house elf who assaulted Harry Potter was probably the one responsible for substituting the cursed train for the gift Peter had originally sent. At the recommendation of Amelia Bones, however, all references to "house elves" were kept out of the press accounts, so that the mystery assailant hopefully would not learn that the authorities knew how the crime had been perpetrated. For similar reasons, Snape, Hestia and Harry privately agreed not to share the name "Dobby" with anyone they didn't implicitly trust, since a ham-fisted government inquiry would only get the poor creature killed before they could learn who its owner was.

As for the train itself, Albus Dumbledore and Amelia Bones both quickly identified it from bitter personal experience as the handiwork of the late Erasmus "Mr. Toymaker" Wilkes, a Death Eater who was killed in a firefight with aurors back in December of 1980, less than a year before the Boy-Who-Lived destroyed You-Know-Who. A master artificer and magical arms dealer, the Toymaker was believed to have been the chief weaponsmith for the Dark Lord. But even he had not been a Death Eater, Wilkes would still have faced a life sentence in Azkaban had he been taken alive due to innumerable counts of felony Muggle-baiting. A twisted sadist, Wilkes had lethally cursed scores of seemingly ordinary items and then reintroduced them to the Muggle

world, apparently just out of a sick sense of humor. It was a young Ministry employee named Arthur Weasley who painstakingly tracked a dozen instances of Muggles dying under unusual circumstances back to Wilkes's handiwork, thereby paving the way for the raid on his home that eventually led to his death and the complete destruction of the venerable Wilkes Manor. For that, Arthur was awarded an Order of Merlin (Third Class) and promoted to head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. Despite Weasley's best efforts, however, samples of the prolific Erasmus Wilkes's macabre handiwork still continued to show up from time to time more than ten years after his death.

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Late that night, an exhausted Peter Pettigrew finally stepped out of the fireplace in his Diagon Alley townhouse and shook the ashes from his cloak before hanging it on a nearby hook. He took a moment to pour himself a glass of Firewhiskey and then made his way to a patch of wall opposite the fireplace. Hanging from it was a moving black-and-white photograph of four fifteen-year-old Hogwarts students laughing and rough-housing together. As he approached the picture, the four Marauders stopped what they were doing and looked out at him with mixed expressions of disdain, anger and sadness, even from the image of the much younger Peter Pettigrew. In particular, the image of young Sirius Black looked out at him with utter hatred and started shouting muted obscenities, for the wizarding photograph did not produce sound. Normally, Peter found the sight of the enraged adolescent Black hurling silent vulgarities at him to be amusing, but it had been a long day and he was too tired to sneer. Ignoring the young Marauders, he placed his free hand over the picture and spoke the pass phrase. "No good. No evil. Only power." Immediately, the picture and the patch of wall it rested on both slid away to reveal a hidden room, one which shouldn't

have been there since the picture had been hanging on an exterior wall.

Peter took another sip from his Firewhiskey as he stepped inside. To his left were boxes and crates full of jewels and galleons, as well as some Muggle currency. Mounted on the wall above them was an ancient family crest weathered by the passage of centuries. To his right was a bookshelf holding a number of tomes a few of which were too dark to be allowed even in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library. The least dusty of them was the original draft of **Occlumency: A Beginner's Guide**. The copy which Peter had provided Jim Potter earlier that day had been carefully edited to remove some of the more ... politically unacceptable sections contained in the original text, but if the boy applied himself, he would indeed learn the principles of Occlumency from it. Well, after a fashion. Pettigrew could only imagine the look on old Nemo's face if he ever learned that the Boy-Who-Lived was studying Occlumency from his little booklet.

Next to the bookshelf were several cabinets packed with scores of cursed objects, including two more models of the Hogwarts Express that were each as deadly as the one unleashed at Potter Manor. It was a ghoulish collection quietly accumulated over the past decade, much of it representative of the mad sadistic genius of the long-dead Erasmus Wilkes. Pettigrew was disappointed that the Toymaker's little trinket hadn't eliminated Harry Potter despite the Tripping Jinx he'd sent the boy's way, but he supposed crippling Rufus Scrimgeour was an acceptable alternative. With a little luck, he could maneuver James in as his replacement, and wouldn't *that* open up some possibilities down the line.

Against the far wall sat a small table with an ornate sealed chest resting on it almost as if it were a shrine. Peter set the glass of Firewhiskey aside, pricked his thumb with his wand, and let a few drops fall on the chest. Then, he touched his wand to the bloodstains and said "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." The lock clicked open. Inside the chest were a number of glass vials and jars. Some were empty but several of the smaller vials contained hairs kept in magical stasis, each vial carefully labeled with the name of each person from whom the hair had been stolen. Peter hadn't used Polyjuice Potion for anything in years, but one never knew what the future might require. There was also a wand in the chest – 13 and ½ inches, yew with a phoenix feather core. He reached down and stroked it gently, and a shudder ran down his back.

Shaking off the sensation, Pettigrew removed one of the larger empty jars from the chest and unscrewed the lid. From his coat pocket, he withdrew a once-white silk handkerchief, now red and still soaking wet with the blood of Jim Potter. A discreet stasis charm had ensured that the blood would stay fresh until he got home, and after he put the handkerchief in the enchanted jar and sealed it, the blood would continue to stay fresh until the day he had need of it. Finally, he pulled a small velvet box from inside the chest and opened it. Inside was a gold ring inset with a ruby gemstone embossed with the Potter crest – the long-lost Potter Heir's ring. Peter smiled maliciously as he held the ring up to the light.

"That's always been the secret of my success, hasn't it, Padfoot, old boy," he said mockingly to the memory of the friend he'd betrayed and ruined. "I *always* have a backup plan."

Chapter End Notes

AN 1: "Marcus Flint" is an awesome name. It just is. It's the name you use as the secret identity for a super hero. It's the name of the mercenary played by Jason Statham who takes on a whole terrorist cell by himself. It's the name of Agent 008, the guy you call in when James Bond is in the hospital. Or maybe it's the name of the SPECTRE agent who PUT James Bond in the hospital. It is NOT the name you waste on a complete dumbass who blatantly cheats at Quidditch, who flunks his senior year of high school, who comes back for a makeup year and briefly serves as Draco Malfoy's third-string henchman behind Crabbe and Goyle, and who then vanishes completely. ERGO, the Marcus Flint is this fic is, at a minimum, on his way to being awesome.

AN 2: If it's not clear from the end of this chapter, I'll spell it out. Peter Pettigrew is hard-core. It always bugged me that canon-Peter wasn't used more effectively. He was always this cringing worthless lump that even the Death Eaters mocked and treated like crap even though he was the person most directly responsible for Voldemort's return. His reasons for betraying the Marauders were never made clear in canon. His reasons for following Voldie were never made clear in canon.

So, for purposes of this AU, assume that Peter was, in his own way, as smart and clever and as well-liked during his school days as the other three Marauders. Assume that the Peter you see here is what canon-Peter would have been if he hadn't spent 11 years as a rat for no plausible reason and that Peter had very specific reasons for betraying his closest friends and becoming a Death Eater - though you won't find out why before Year 3. That said, while he is a secret enemy, he is not necessarily the Secret Enemy.

# **On the Importance of Emotion**

## **CHAPTER 10: On the Necessity of Emotions**

### ***PANDEMONIUM AT POTTER MANOR!***

### ***BOY-WHO-LIVED NEARLY MURDERED AT BIRTHDAY BASH!***

### ***DEATH EATER SYMPATHIZERS AT LARGE?***

***by Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent to the Evening Prophet (July 31, 1992)***

*Earlier this afternoon, one of the most anticipated annual events of Wizarding Britain was marred by horrific violence as a deadly cursed artifact was unleashed at stately Potter Manor during the afternoon fete celebrating the twelfth birthday of James Potter, Jr., "The Boy-Who-Lived." While in the process of opening presents sent by well-wishers – indeed, presents intended for charitable donations to the underprivileged! – our young Jim was tricked into unwittingly releasing the artifact which took the form of a model copy of the Hogwarts Express, a cruel mockery of a cherished memory from our collective childhood. The model train came to life and went on a rampage, killing two aurors and a party guest before it and the various replicas of itself generated during the course of its killing spree were neutralized by the swift actions of Chief Warlock and Hogwarts Headmaster Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore. At a press conference, Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, revealed that the cursed artifact bears the markings of the infamous and long-deceased Death Eater Erasmus "Mr. Toymaker" Wilkes, one of the most notorious servants of You-Know-Who. [See page 3 for*

*an article about the so-called Toymaker's reign of terror that ended with his death in 1980.]*

*Director Bones was unwilling to speculate as to how a gift sent to the Boy-Who-Lived by Peter Pettigrew, a longtime confidante of the Potter Family, was replaced by the cursed item, though she assured reporters that Pettigrew himself was not a suspect. Interestingly, this year's birthday fete also marks the first time ever that a significant number of school-aged Slytherin students were in attendance at Potter Manor, invited one and all by the twin brother of the Boy-Who-Lived: Hadrian Remus Potter. Faithful readers may recall that it was this same Potter sibling's unprecedented Sorting into Slytherin House last September which provoked a public reprimand in the form of a Howler from his father, Lord Potter, over concerns that young Harry might follow "the Dark Path." True, Harry Potter did speak to this reporter of his strong opposition to the ideology of the Death Eater movement, stating that "Slytherin House has more to offer Wizarding Britain than just the bigoted lackeys of a failed dark lord who was destroyed by my brother more than a decade ago." But it is striking that the first public appearance of Harry Potter alongside his famous twin should be accompanied by the first major Death Eater attack in nearly ten years. This reporter can only hope Harry Potter was sincere in his assertions that he harbors no ill will towards his family over his decade-long exile from Wizarding Society.*

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## **1 August 1992**

Neville and Lady Augusta watched Harry uneasily from across the breakfast table, but neither felt comfortable saying anything to him. So far, Harry himself gave no sign of anger or offense over Rita Skeeter's remarks about him in



the special edition of *The Prophet* rushed out the night before. Neville was furious on his behalf over the thinly-veiled suggestion that he might have had anything to do with the attack on Potter Manor. Augusta, who was older and wiser, saw that the article was a two-pronged attack: Insinuate on one hand that Harry was a budding dark wizard while at the same time quote him directly on the subject of "the bigoted lackeys of a failed dark lord," a provocative statement which was certain to brand him as a blood traitor in the eyes of the more reactionary Slytherins. Both of them, however, were more worried at the moment by the fact that Harry was reading the offending article without any apparent reaction at all beyond calmly munching on a scone. Neville was reminded of the unearthly calm and poise Harry showed on his first day at Hogwarts after James Potter had sent him the Howler mentioned in Skeeter's report. Augusta, however, was more concerned about Harry's forays into Occlumency, a discipline sometimes abused by the unwary as a crutch to avoid dealing with painful emotions. Sometimes, a young Occlumens would go too far in suppressing such unpleasant feelings and, as a result, unwittingly turn himself into a heartless sociopath rather than deal with the pain of living.

In point of fact, however, Harry was *not* using Occlumency to suppress his emotions at all at the moment. He *did* use Occlumency immediately upon reading the salacious article, but only to the extent necessary to control his anger long enough to study the article objectively. Having done so, his anger was soon replaced by curiosity. Mentally reviewing the old *Prophet* articles Augusta had provided, Harry recalled that Skeeter's earliest articles about the Potters starting back in 1982 were full of innuendo about possible marital troubles, suggestions that Lily was a gold-digger who had snared James with a love potion, rumors that James was probably cheating on her with some Pureblood,

and eventually hints about accounting irregularities in the Jim Potter Charitable Trust. All of that lasted until Jim's fourth birthday party, after which Skeeter's coverage of the Potters abruptly changed from salacious to glowing and, at times, practically fawning ... until now.

*"Obviously," thought Harry, "the Potters - or perhaps Pettigrew - have something on Skeeter to keep her in line. But is she going after me because I'm not part of the deal and attacking me is her way of getting back at the Potters? Or is she going after me at the Potters' direction while they pretend to my face that they want to make peace?"*

Harry gave an internal shrug, as he didn't have enough information to guess which and wouldn't proceed against Skeeter until he had his answer. Anyway, while he stayed with the Longbottoms, he was fairly well inoculated against accusations that he was going dark, and he was planning on taking a more aggressive "anti-Voldemort" position in Slytherin House anyway, so in that sense, Skeeter was doing his work for him. Still, the woman was dangerous to his long term goals and would almost certainly be more so once he came of age. He mentally added *"find out what's up with Rita Skeeter"* to his to-do list and reached for another scone, politely ignoring the concerned expressions of Neville and Lady Augusta as he did so.

It was not until he reached the very bottom of Skeeter's article that he felt the need to reinforce his Occlumency shields so as to actively suppress his emotions. The last paragraph finally identified the three victims of the attack. Auror George Wyndham (*Hufflepuff*, 1988), Auror Xander Majid (*Slytherin*, 1982), and Madame Elizabeth Podmore (*Gryffindor*, 1950). The article listed their survivors, offered condolences to their families, and noted that funeral services for Mme. Podmore would be hold on Monday,

August 3, with a public memorial service for Aurors Wyndham and Majid to be held the next day in Diagon Alley in the public forum in front of Gringotts.

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## ***9 August 1992***

Harry and the Longbottoms attended Elizabeth's funeral together. James and Lily Potter were there, but Harry avoided them. Jim did not attend. It was a closed casket service, and throughout the proceedings, Harry tried not to think about what might be in that casket. Using the skills Mr. X had been teaching him, Harry had already isolated the memories of seeing poor George Wyndham die right in front of him so that those memories would not cause post-traumatic stress. But still, even with Occlumency, it was deeply troubling for the boy to think about the kindly woman he'd only just met dying soon after in such a horrible manner. At the funeral, he shook Artie's hand and gave his condolences, and the devastated man merely nodded and thanked him. Harry did the same for Artie and Elizabeth's son, Sturgis, who was noticeably cold in response. The boy suspected that Sturgis Podmore somehow blamed him for Elizabeth's death, and he was concerned to think that Artie might feel the same.

Harry's tutoring resumed on the evening of Tuesday the 4th (after the memorial service earlier that day). In most of his August lessons, Harry would be joined by Neville. However, Augusta had spoken with Hestia Jones, and the two had agreed that it might be best for most of their tutoring sessions with Tonks to take place at Longbottom Manor. Augusta, who was unwilling to trust her grandson's education to someone with no first name, contacted Andromeda Tonks who confirmed that her daughter had been christened as "Nymphadora." Suddenly more

understanding of Tonks's preferences, Harry resolved never to tease her over her full name unless truly provoked. For security reasons, however, Harry's Occlumency sessions with Mr. X were still held in Room 13, although Hestia now oversaw them rather than Artie.

On Wednesday the 5th, Harry contacted Hestia to see if it would be possible to meet with Artie, and she told him that the older man would be back to work on the following Monday and she'd schedule an appointment for that afternoon. She'd argued with her boss and told him to take as much time to grieve as he needed to, but Artie had finally admitted that he found it difficult to remain home alone in the house he'd shared with Elizabeth for so many decades and that he needed some work to occupy himself.

The following Monday, Harry stepped out of the fireplace in the lobby of Podmore & Associates and immediately wished he'd picked another day to come. The embarrassed secretary asked him to take a seat and inquired whether he needed any refreshment while studiously ignoring the sounds of angry yelling that were emanating from Artie's office. It sounded like he and Sturgis were having a row, and if the bits and pieces Harry could make out were any clue, it was about him. Apparently, the younger Podmore had accepted Rita Skeeter's insinuations at face value and was furious with his father's involvement with "*dark Slytherins*." Then, after some more heated argument, Harry clearly heard the words "*the reason Mother died*." Dead silence followed. Harry swallowed and tried to ignore the cold sensation in the pit of his stomach. The next thing he heard was the sound of Artie yelling "*GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!*" at the top of his lungs. Seconds later, Sturgis Podmore exited his father's office quickly, pausing just long enough to shoot Harry a hateful look before storming out of the building.

Artie stood in the open doorway and watched his son depart, his face still red. Then, he turned to Harry and, in a tired voice, politely invited him into the office. Taking a calming breath, Harry followed him inside.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Harry. Sturgis ... well, he's not handling his mother's death as well as one might hope. It's been a difficult time for us both."

"I understand. In fact, that's kind of why I'm here. In light of ... what happened, I wanted to let you know that if you've reconsidered your agreement to represent me, I'll understand completely, and I'll be happy to release you and Hestia both from your vow."

Artie looked at the boy sadly. "Harry, what happened at Potter Manor wasn't your fault."

"Not entirely," Harry said quietly. "But would you and Elizabeth have been at that party if I wasn't your client? Besides, you and your son are both grieving. I don't want to come between you two at a time like this."

"And what about you, Harry? You saw George Wyndham die right in front of you, and you could have easily died yourself. How are you holding up?"

The boy shrugged. "I'm fine. That's why I'm paying for all these Occlumency lessons, isn't it?"

Artie looked at him strangely for a few seconds before finally speaking again. "Well, then. I appreciate your maturity and candor. I'll consider the matter carefully and let you know whether I'll be continuing your representation."

Harry nodded, but then Artie continued. "But for today, at least, I am still your solicitor. And while you're here, I have something for you. Something I've been meaning to get to you for weeks now, but one thing after another always got in the way. I think now is the right time." He stepped over to a cabinet from which he removed a small black marble dish that fit in the palm of his hand. He placed it on his desk, pulled out his wand and tapped the dish twice, causing it to instantly resize into a large bowl nearly three feet across.

"This, Harry, is *your* pensieve. You can resize it for portability by tapping it twice with your wand. And here's how you withdraw memories to place inside it for review or, if you wish, storage." He demonstrated by touching his wand to the side of his head, causing silver teardrops pour from his eye. With a gesture, he caused the silver liquid to float down into the basin. "There. The memory is now stored in the pensieve and is ready for viewing. All you have to do is lean forward and put your head into the bowl. Like this."

He demonstrated, and Harry followed suit. There was a blur of motion all around him, and then Harry and Artie were both standing in what appeared to be a large kitchen. To Harry's surprise, Elizabeth was there, along with another Artie who seemed oblivious to their presence. Harry gasped and took a step back, but the real Artie put his hand around Harry's shoulder, gently but firmly. "Shh," he said softly. "It's alright. Just watch."

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*"So," said Artie. "That's the boy's story. What do you think?"*

*"Well," said Elizabeth. "I think I want to know why you're telling me all this, dear. You don't normally keep me so well-informed about your clients."*

Artie grimaced. "I've never had a client like Harry Potter. And while I have tentatively accepted representation, I thought you deserved to know what we'd be getting into before we got into it over our heads. He's the estranged son of Lord Potter and the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived. The circumstances of his placement implicate Albus Dumbledore. And when it eventually comes out that the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived was Sorted into Slytherin and his father sent him a Howler about it the very first day, the press will probably have a field day. And on flip side of all that, the very fact of his connection to the Potter family means that we'd risk attention from Pureblood bigots and Death Eater sympathizers just by associating with him. It's a lot to consider."

Elisabeth's eyes flashed. "Artemus. Lemuel. Podmore. Answer me this one question: If you were a bachelor right now and didn't for some silly reason think you had to worry over your wife's concerns, would you hesitate for one second to take this boy's case?"

Artie looked down at the table, abashed. "No," he said quietly. "No, I wouldn't."

"Well, then," she said crisply. "How **dare** you think that I would have any reservations on the subject just because we might incur the wrath of Purebloods or Wizengamot Lords or the mighty Albus Dumbledore! **I'm** the Gryffindor in this family, not you! And I was taught by Albus Dumbledore that you always do what's right instead of what's easy ... even if what's right includes going up against Dumbledore himself!"

She took a deep breath and spoke more calmly. "And while you were Sorted into Ravenclaw, husband, you've always had a lot of Gryffindor in you as well. That's probably why I

*married you." She reached out and put her hand over his. "Artie, from what you've told me, what was done to that child was ... monstrous. Simply monstrous. I don't think that you've ever told me of about a client of yours whose life story cried out for justice the way Harry Potter's does. I am proud to think that my husband might play a part in winning that justice for him. Just as I have always been proud to be your wife."*

*Artie smiled, took Elizabeth's hand in his own, and raised it up to his lips to kiss it. The room then became misty and indistinct as the memory ended.*

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Harry looked around to find himself back in Artie's office. Artie looked down at the boy and started to speak, but was completely unable to do so. He blinked repeatedly and then looked away, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe away the tears that were filling his eyes. Harry simply looked at him for a moment that seemed to stretch for days, his face an emotionless mask.

In each person's life, there are innumerable crossroads where one must choose a way forward. Often they are invisible crossroads - decision points that seem minor or even insignificant at the time but which have life-changing results. Many, many years later, Harry Potter would look back at this precise moment and realize that it represented one of the most important decisions of his life and, indeed, the very one about which Lady Serena had warned him. By now, through months of hard work, Harry was almost a second-level Occlumens. As such, by focusing his mind and running through a quick mental exercise, Harry could easily suppress the unpleasant feelings he was currently experiencing and lock them away. He could tell Artie once more how sorry he was for the man's loss. Perhaps even pat



him on the back in an approximation of compassion before leaving the office. Had he done so, it was quite possible that he might never permit himself to feel a single genuine emotion again for the rest of his life. But as Harry studied the man who had done so much for him and was now in such pain, he thought about the memory he'd just witnessed and about *why* Artie had chosen to show it to him. And for the very first time in his entire life, Harry Potter *wanted to cry*.

Surrendering to anguish, the boy rushed forward and wrapped his arms around Artie at the waist and gave in to heaving sobs of raw emotion. Artie returned the embrace tightly and closed his eyes as his own tears flowed freely. They held each other for a long time before Artie finally spoke.

"After careful *-sniff-* consideration, Mr. Potter, I have decided that I shall continue to represent you and your interests as long as you desire me as your solicitor. And *-sniff-* I shall continue to be your friend for a hell of a lot longer than that."

# **The Ice Cream Conference**

## **CHAPTER 11: The Ice Cream Conference**

***19 August 1992***

School letters arrived on August 12th, and Harry and the Longbottoms went to purchase school supplies on the 19th. Making their way through Diagon Alley, the three stopped off for ice cream at Fortescue's where they met up with Hermione, Blaise, Padma and Justin, along with most of their parents. Countess Zabini was not in attendance, but Gunther was there, leaning with his back to a wall from a vantage point that gave him a commanding view of the room. At one point, Florean Fortescue actually asked the towering bodyguard if he'd like a chair or perhaps a milkshake. The *look* that Gunther gave him had the man practically running back to his counter in fear. As for the rest, Augusta arranged for a separate table for the grown-ups so that they could talk about their various school-related concerns without the children hearing, while the children could talk freely without their parents eavesdropping.

The Muggle parents in particular were still somewhat alarmed about the "terrorist attack" at Potter Manor a few weeks prior, especially since most of them were in attendance. Augusta was quick to reassure them all that Hogwarts was considered one of the most secure magical places in Britain. That mollified them somewhat but not completely, as the Grangers and the Finch-Fletchleys were all four worried about "dangerous elements" within the school itself. And at that comment, all four of them looked over in Harry's direction with concern. Harry gave them his most winning smile, but it seemed to do nothing to reassure

the Muggles. Justin, on the other hand, gave his parents a murderous look before turning to the Slytherin.

"Harry, I am *so* sorry. I can't imagine what's gotten into Mother and Father. They've both taken a wholly irrational dislike to you and won't even say why."

"It's not a problem," said Harry, trying to make light of things. "Jim was probably rude to them or something and they can't tell us apart."

"Hmm. Perhaps so," replied Justin.

"Anyway, enough of that. We haven't talked since the birthday party, and I wanted to say how sorry I am that your parent's first exposure to magical culture ended so ... unpleasantly. I didn't see you afterwards. Did your family have any problems getting away?"

"Oh no. Luckily, we were well away from the center of all the action, thank goodness. And Ron Weasley's parents were nearby with a portkey in the form of a ten-foot-long string of Christmas tree lights that Mrs. Weasley was hiding in her purse somehow. I guess they need one that big for a family that large. Anyway, Mr. Weasley insisted that we join them, so we all went back to the Burrow for the rest of the afternoon until Mr. Weasley could arrange a temporary Floo connection to our home." Justin leaned in almost conspiratorially. "I say, did you know they have a flying car?! Is that legal?"

Harry coughed delicately. "So I've heard. And no, it's not. Mr. Weasley's a wonderful man but a bit indiscreet, so I'd appreciate it if everyone kept that little detail to themselves."

Justin nodded sagely and tapped his finger to his nose. "Right-o." Before he could say anything more, however, two more people entered Fortescue's: Theo Nott ... and Draco Malfoy. Theo said his hellos to everyone and then asked Draco with a badly faked smile whether he wanted to join them.

"You're too kind, all of you. Unfortunately, I'm here with my father, who needs me for some important errands. Perhaps another time. Theo, we'll meet you at the bookstore in two hours. Blaise, Harry, Hermione, so wonderful to see you again." He turned to Neville, and his sincerity lapsed a bit. "Longbottom."

"Malfoy," said Neville evenly. With that, Draco nodded to the rest of the group. Then, he turned and strode off in the direction of Lucius Malfoy, who was waiting out in the street with an ornate wooden box under his arm. Theo's smile lasted until the two were out of sight ... at which point it turned into a snarl as he sat down.

"Egregious little *prick*," he spat out.

"Theo!" exclaimed a scandalized Hermione.

"Well, I'm sorry!" he replied hotly. "But I have been stuck with that little brat since June 20th, and it's been wearing on my nerves. And what really chaps me is that as obnoxious as he's been, this has *still* been the best summer of my life. How pathetic is that?!"

"What was it like?" asked Harry with some concern.

Theo sighed. "His father has actually been a perfect host. His mother's rather imposing but she was rarely around. The biggest problem was all the days when Mr. Malfoy was

gone and I had a choice between loneliness and spending time with *Draco*."

"But he's ... better, right?" asked Neville. "I mean he was here for nearly thirty seconds and didn't say anything mean."

"He's not overtly bigoted anymore, but he's still a jerk. For instance, if he were talking to, say, Justin here, he won't openly use the M-word, but he might... I don't know, make fun of his shoes or something."

"My ... shoes?" the Muggleborn asked in confusion.

"Well, it would probably be something both cleverer and meaner than that. I'm proud to say that I don't think like him so I can't really predict what sort of insults he'd use."

"Well, how has he treated you over the summer?" asked Padma.

"Oh, he treated me fine. He'll always be polite, if insincerely, to me and to Hermione..." Theo trailed off sheepishly as Harry cleared his throat softly and gave him the *you're talking too much about secret stuff* look that he'd learned to recognize the previous year after the fiasco in Hagrid's hut.

"And why *exactly* is that, if I may ask?" said Hermione suspiciously.

Harry started to respond when Blaise interrupted. "Harry did a Slytherin thing. Please don't make a big deal out of it."

Hermione was obviously unhappy with that, but she remembered her argument with Harry the previous Easter, as well as the long talk she and Neville had about how it

was wrong to expect Harry to act like a Gryffindor. Obviously, some bit of Potter's Slytherin sneakiness that she would likely consider unethical if she knew any details had forced Draco Malfoy to at least pretend to be a decent human being. Malfoy didn't seem to be under the effects of an illegal spell, so it was probably just blackmail or something. And in light of how Malfoy had acted since literally the first day she'd met him, it would be almost churlish for her to complain about Harry using such tactics against the son of a former Death Eater. So she nodded once in Blaise's direction and then immediately changed the subject to talk about the coming school year and new goals for the study group.

The group talked amongst themselves over two more rounds of ice cream when Harry stood and said "Well, if you'll excuse me, I need to use the facilities. Blaise and Theo, would you mind joining me?"

Padma laughed. "I thought it was just us girls who went to the bathroom in groups."

"Wise Slytherins do everything in groups, Padma," said Harry with mock gravity. "You never know who's out there." With that, the three Slytherins bowed towards the two young ladies in the group and then made their way to the men's restroom. Once inside, Harry cast a privacy charm on the trio.

"*"Blaise and Theo, would you mind joining me in the men's toilet?"* That was embarrassingly unsubtle, Harry," said Blaise with amusement.

"They all know we're Slytherins, and they're still our friends anyway," he replied. "Subtlety would be a waste of energy

with them. Now, Theo, be honest with us. How was it *really* at Malfoy Manor?"

"Like I said – surprisingly not bad. Mr. Malfoy was very nice. He taught me how to ride Abraxans and he paid for me to participate in Draco's tutoring. If I go back next summer, he's teaching me fencing. He, um ... sort of implied that he didn't really like my Father even though they used to be '*associates*'" – Theo actually used air quotes for that word – "and that he's happy to basically provide a foster home during the Summer breaks in order to keep me away from Father, although he never came right out and said any of it that bluntly."

"What sort of tutoring did you get?" asked Blaise curiously.

"The big four. DADA, Potions, Transfiguration and Charms. Mr. Malfoy tutored us himself. He got Os on his NEWTS for all four areas. Anyway, Mrs. Malfoy was gone a lot – shopping in Paris and Milan or visiting friends, supposedly. Mr. Malfoy was gone a good bit too. He's high up in the Wizengamot and also a British representative to the ICW."

"Hang on a minute," Harry interrupted. "Narcissa Black Malfoy goes by '*Mrs.*'?"

"Yeah, I thought that was weird too."

Blaise took in Harry's thoughtful expression. "What? Does it mean something worrisome when a Pureblooded woman calls herself '*Mrs.*'?"

Harry closed his eyes in concentration. "Well, when someone like Molly Weasley does, it means she rejects Pureblood cultural norms, but I guess we can rule that out in Narcissa's case. I vaguely recall ... *something*. Some obscure legal significance to a wife married into a

Wizengamot family calling herself 'Mrs.' rather than 'Madame,' but I can't remember what it was. Some weird bit of inheritance trivia, perhaps?" He shook his head. "Nevermind, it's not important now. I'll look it up later." He turned back to Theo. "Now, for the big money question: Do the Malfoys have any house elves and, if so, what are their names?"

Theo looked surprised at the odd question, and Harry briefly explained his encounter with Dobby that presaged the doxy attack. The boy was surprisingly indignant about being kept out of the loop.

"Somebody tried to kill you, and I'm just now learning about it?! I mean, I know I was at Malfoy Manor, but can't we work out a code to let me know about things like that before next summer? Like '*the rooster crowed at midnight*' means '*somebody tried to feed Harry to a pack of feral pixies*'?"

"Doxies. And we'll make that a project before next summer. Now, house elves ...?"

"Right, well, they do have one named Dobby and it's as weird and twitchy as you describe. And while that's obviously highly suspicious, it's not conclusive. Like I said, both Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were gone a lot this summer, though never together. They're not close. I mean, *literally* not close. They sleep in separate *wings* of the house, and when they take meals together, they sit at opposite ends of a twenty-foot-long table and barely speak to one another. Draco's caught in the middle – he wants to earn his father's approval but he's too much of a mama's boy. Anyway, whenever either of the Malfoys left, they always took Dobby with them because the other three elves were needed to run the estate. Dobby's a bit ... off, and I



don't think they trust him to do much beyond carry packages and luggage and certainly don't want to leave him unattended at the manor house. Frankly, I'm amazed he found time to sneak away and talk with you for five minutes, let alone interfere with your owl posts. And while it's possible that Dobby is aware of a plot by one or both of the Malfoys to harm you, it's also possible that he just learned of some plot while accompanying Mr. Malfoy to an ICW meeting. There are a few ex-Death Eaters serving as ICW delegates, and there are also notorious Pureblood bigots from other countries who might want to follow in You-Know-Who's footsteps. *Or*, Dobby might have overheard something while Mrs. Malfoy was visiting with some of her high society friends. I know she spent a weekend with the Warringtons and later went to Milan with Madame Bletchley. Both of those families are blood purists, though I don't think any of them ever formally became Death Eaters. That might explain why he wouldn't give you a straight answer about what's going on – he might not actually know any details."

"Hmm. So it's *probably* a plot that originated out of House Malfoy, but it *could* be a plot by someone else that Dobby merely overheard."

"You want me to corner him when we get back? See what I can find out?" asked Theo.

"No, it's too dangerous. One thing I learned about house elves this summer is that they're bonded to the actual *homes* they serve, which means that they can theoretically eavesdrop on conversations that happen in the house even if they're not physically in the room. If you talk to Dobby about this and one of the other, more loyal house elves overhears it and reports it to the Malfoys, you could both be in serious trouble."

Theo nodded at that. They talked for a few minutes more and then Harry took a moment to readjust his hair in the mirror while Blaise and Theo mocked him for his Sleekeazy addiction. Then, they returned to the other children. Once everyone finished up with their ice cream, the children and their guardians made their way towards Flourish & Blotts to pick up their school books. There was a huge line out in front, as apparently there was a book signing scheduled for today by someone called Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Anybody know who he is?" asked Harry.

"Socialite, bon vivant, globe-trotting adventurer, and valiant warrior against the forces of darkness," said Blaise sarcastically. "He puts out a book every year or so about how he saved some obscure village in some far-flung corner of the world from the scourge of some kind of rampaging monster. The books are decent reads though the titles are a bit insipid. **Gadding with Ghouls. Holidays with Hags.** That sort of thing."

"So you don't believe he's all he's cracked up to be?" asked Hermione with a bit of disappointment.

"Let's just say I think there's some embellishment going on," he replied.

"I must say," said Justin, "that I was quite surprised to realize that in the wizarding world, the line between fiction and non-fiction is rather blurred compared to the Muggle world. I picked that much up just from reading a few books about *The Adventures of the Boy-Who-Lived!*" He and a few of the others laughed at that, but Harry and Hermione looked confused. They'd seen several books about the Boy-Who-Lived the previous year at Flourish & Blotts but they were all history books. *The Jim Potter Adventure*

*Series* consisted of fictional works which were located elsewhere in the store. Augusta, who'd overheard their discussions, explained.

"A few years after You-Know-Who was destroyed, a wizarding publishing company put out a book about a four-year-old Jim Potter getting separated from his parents, wandering off, and having all sorts of silly adventures among Muggles before returning home in time for his parents to tuck him safely into bed. It was wildly successful among wizarding children ... until the Potters found out about it and sued. But after winning the court case, they realized how much money was to be made from such books, so they licensed Jim Potter's name and likeness to that same publishing house for the production of more *Boy-Who-Lived* books with the majority of the profits going into the Charitable Trust."

Harry and the Muggleborn children looked utterly aghast at the idea of selling a child's name and likeness to a publisher, even if the proceeds did go to charity.

"I remember the earliest ones as being pretty awful," Neville spoke up. "Five-year-old Jim Potter rides a dragon and rescues a fairy princess. Seven-year-old Jim Potter becomes the honorary King of the Leprechauns. That sort of rubbish. The later ones, where he's just solving crimes and capturing escaped Death Eaters and things like that, are a lot better written."

Justin laughed. "That's because the later ones are brazenly plagiarized from better written novels. The last one I read – **Jim Potter and the Clue of the Screeching Owl** – was *literally* the same book as a Hardy Boys novel with a similar title which I'd read when I was nine ... only with every reference to Frank and Joe Hardy replaced by Jim

and his house elf *Slappy* and with magic inserted into the plot in a completely haphazard way."

Hermione and Blaise laughed at that, but Justin had to explain the concept of "The Hardy Boys" to all the other children who were astonished that Jim's publisher would just flat-out steal a Muggle book and shoehorn the Boy-Who-Lived into it. By that point, the group was nearly to Flourish & Blotts, and Harry noticed the Weasley family standing together in a clump near the door looking around nervously. Harry walked up to the group to greet them, accompanied by Hermione, Neville and Justin.

"Oh, hello, Harry! And young Mr. Finch-Fletchley! I hope you and your parents are doing well!" exclaimed Mr. Weasley. Then, his voice dropped down to a whisper. "Um, by any chance, have you seen your brother Jim around, Harry?"

"No sir, I haven't seen him since our birthday. Should I have?"

"Well, your mum and dad couldn't be here today. Lady Potter had to go on to Hogwarts for a faculty meeting while Lord Potter is at auror headquarters helping to organize the ... um, things that aurors do," he finished lamely. Harry smiled. As he'd said earlier, he liked Mr. Weasley a lot, but he was alternately amused and appalled by the man's inability to keep a secret. Not that it was much of a secret – the papers had been full of reports that the Auror Corps was raiding homes of suspected Death Eater sympathizers in search of more cursed objects that might lead to whoever sent the train to the Jim's birthday party. (Harry refused to consider the spectacle as *his* birthday party in any sense.) "Anyway, because of that Jim came to spend the weekend

with us at the Burrow. Unfortunately, he didn't make it through to our destination."

"I told you, Arthur. It sounded like he sneezed while he was trying to say 'Diagon Alley.' Who *knows* where he's gotten off to?!" Mrs. Weasley said, looking as though she were about to cry.

"Well, I don't know where he originally went off to, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry, "but I know where he is now." With that, the young Slytherin pointed down the street to where an abashed Jim Potter was being escorted by an angry looking Hagrid.

"JIM POTTER! Where have you BEEN?!" she shrieked at the embarrassed boy.

"Ah found 'im wanderin' round Knockturn Alley," said Hagrid, disapprovingly.

Scandalized, Molly started to scold the boy who interrupted her before she could. "It wasn't on purpose, Mrs. Weasley. I sneezed while stepping into the Floo, and somehow instead of the Leaky Cauldron, it sent me to Borgin & Burkes."

Molly almost went off again at that news, but this time, Arthur stepped in. "It was an accident Molly, and the boy is safe. No harm, no foul. Now let's get on in and get the children's books before anything else happens."

"Wait just a second!" exclaimed Hermione almost angrily. Everyone turned to look at her in surprise as she narrowed her eyes at the group. "There's a Diagon Alley *and* a *Knockturn Alley*? Is there also a Horizont Alley or an Uncondition Alley?"

Percy answered almost instantly as if excited to be given a pop quiz. "Yes to both. They're wizarding communities in Sydney and Toronto, respectively. Why do you ask?"

Hermione just stared at him for several seconds. "... no reason," she said weakly. Then, she turned and walked back towards the entrance to Flourish & Blotts with a slightly dazed expression while muttering to herself about "*an entire subculture based on bad puns.*"

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Finally, the sizeable group of wizarding children along with their parents made it inside the bookstore. Gunther, who was along as Blaise Zabini's chauffeur and bodyguard, remained outside ostensibly to "guard the perimeter." As soon as his employer's son had entered, the hulking man relaxed and stepped around to the side of the building, where he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a Muggle lighter. Hagrid, who was just about to leave, caught sight of the figure who was now leaned against the corner of the building having a smoke. Suddenly, his eyes widened.

"Gunther?! Is 'zat ye?" he exclaimed.

Gunther took another drag on his cigarette while pulling his chauffeur's hat down further over his eyes with his free hand. He gave no sign of having heard Hagrid's remark, so naturally, the half-giant came closer and spoke even louder.

"It is! It's Wee Gunther! I thought ye was still in Exeter. What brings ya to Diagon Alley?"

Gunther sighed loudly, exhaling a cloud of smoke as he did. Then, he turned and looked up at Hagrid who, despite Gunther's great size, stood a good foot-and-a-half taller. He smiled but with a hint of exasperation.

"Work, Cousin Rubeus," he said in a Devonshire accent only slightly less pronounced than Hagrid's. "I'm 'ere on work."

# Meet Gilderoy Lockhart

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 12: Meet Gilderoy Lockhart

As soon as the children had fought their way into Flourish & Blotts, they quickly split up to explore the bookstore. Harry, Theo and Blaise climbed up to a second floor landing, content to observe the gathering crowd, while Hermione, Neville and the rest went off to hunt down and collect their required text books or simply to explore. Like most of his peers, Harry had already sent in an owl order for the required books along with a Gringotts draft to pay for them, and he would simply pick up a wrapped package marked with his name at the counter when he was ready to leave. He'd have rather had the books sent by owl post directly to Longbottom Manor, but Flourish & Blotts refused to send text books via owl post during "book rush," the period between August 12th and September 1st when the need for text books drove the bulk of their annual sales. After all, if a student actually *has* to come to the store to pick up his books, he's more likely to make an impulse purchase or two (or ten in Hermione's case) to go along with them than if he just ordered a delivery. Most Slytherins, Ravenclaws and even Hufflepuffs handled school book purchases the way Harry did. The only students actually running around the store desperately looking for their texts were First Years and Gryffindors, the latter of whom apparently considered procrastination to be a House virtue. Even Hermione declined to pre-order her text books under the theory that searching for the required texts in the stacks gave her an



excuse to explore for other books that that she might never discover if she owl-ordered.

Today, however, Harry was rather surprised to see that the Hogwarts students were outnumbered by a huge coven of middle-aged witches who were filling the store while waiting for Lockhart's book-signing to start. In the middle of the store (obstructing foot traffic, Harry noted irritably) was a large table with stacks of new books ready to be autographed. Surrounding it were several large moving pictures of the man himself – Gilderoy Lockhart – smiling and winking at the crowd. Harry's immediate thought was that he was a ridiculous fop, with elaborately over-styled hair, a blue velvet and satin suit and matching cloak ("Baby Blue," he would eventually learn), and teeth that gleamed a preternatural white. Harry wondered how anyone could take such a man seriously as a "wizarding hero." Then he recalled how many people considered Jim a hero for something he did as a baby and wondered how many others were credulous enough to believe that the stories from the "*Boy-Who-Lived Adventures*" were actually true.

The answer to that last question came soon enough. Harry noticed the Git-Who-Lived ascending the stairs towards him, accompanied by Ron, Lavender, Ginny and Dean Thomas (with whom Ginny had struck up a conversation). Along the way, Jim stopped to give a few comments to passing reporters and to pose for a few pictures. An excited little man in a mauve top hat who introduced himself as Daedalus Diggle stopped Jim and asked him to autograph a copy of **Jim Potter and The Night of the Werewolf**. To Harry's amusement, it seemed clear that the silly man actually thought the children's book was nonfiction. Curiously, Harry also noticed that Jim seemed annoyed for just an instant before hiding his emotions behind a mask of faux humility and noblesse oblige along with just a dash of

youthful bravado as he cheerfully signed the book. It was a fairly convincing mask that would fool most non-Slytherins. Harry also noticed that Ginny stood a few feet behind him with her arms crossed while watching the exchange with mild disapproval. Harry smiled. The Weasley Twins had mentioned that she'd read all of Jim's books, but at the time, he'd assumed they meant history books. Now that he knew about the fiction series loosely based on Jim's life, he understood her hero worship a bit better and was pleased to see her reaction to the *real* Jim Potter.

"Harry," Jim said coolly as he drew near.

"Hello, Little Brother!" Harry replied amiably. "How was Knockturn Alley? I'm curious to hear all about it since the papers all think I'm a future dark wizard. How ironic that you actually got to visit it before me."

"Very funny, snake. There was a Floo mishap and I just landed there on accident. I did have one interesting encounter, though. I ended up in Borgin & Burkes' antique shop and while I was hiding from the owners, your friend Draco and his Death Eater father showed up. I didn't hear everything they said, but the gist was that they were wanting to sell off some dark artifacts in case they got raided."

"Hmm. Actually, Little Brother, the *only* thing I find interesting about that otherwise tedious story is the amusing suggestion that Draco and I are friends. Believe it or not, it is possible and actually quite common for Slytherins to be polite and cordial to people they actively dislike or even hate. In fact, when in public, we're usually much more polite to our enemies than we are to our friends. Isn't that right, Blaise? Theo?"

"You said it, Scarhead!" said Theo cheerfully.

"Whatever, Potty, I don't even care," said Blaise with affected boredom.

Jim fumed at that. "So you're not even concerned that your ... house-mate is dealing in dark artifacts and may have had something to do with the attack on our home?!"

"Well, what exactly do you expect me to do about it? Chase down Draco Malfoy and arrest him? Why aren't you out talking to our father who is also the auror assigned to oversee all these raids on former Death Eater's homes that are all over the papers? Or maybe you plan to investigate the Malfoys yourself, perhaps accompanied by your assistant and sidekick, Slappy the Crime-Solving House Elf."

Jim's nostrils flare alarmingly at that jibe, and he started to respond angrily when Lavender stepped between the two brothers. "Oh stop it, both of you! You'll just cause a scene and get us kicked out, and I don't want to miss Gilderoy Lockhart over your lame family drama!"

Before either brother could respond to that, a door opened and in walked the store manager followed by the man of the hour: Gilderoy Lockhart in the flesh. The waiting crowd immediately broke out into loud applause which the man eagerly soaked up as he waved to everyone and flashed the smile that, according to Lavender, was the five-time winner of "*Witch Weekly's* Most-Charming-Smile Award." And Harry had to admit that it was indeed an impressive set of teeth. As the man made his way through the crowd towards the signing table, Lavender reached into her purse and produced a set of omnoculars, much to Jim's annoyance.

"I cannot believe you are such a fan-girl for that ponce," he snapped. "My dad says half the things in his books are

completely made up."

"Oh who cares about those stupid books!" she said without taking her eyes away from the omnoculars. "I just want to know how he exfoliates. And just look at that *hair*! He must have spent two hours *at least* styling it but there's not even a hint of any product!"

Harry looked at Lavender incredulously. "No product! Impossible!" Then, he made a grab for her omnoculars, but she slapped his hand away and shushed him as Lockhart prepared to speak. Harry rubbed his hand as he turned towards the author, and he was surprised to notice that Lockhart was looking back up at their group. As soon as they made eye contact, however, the celebrated wizard turned his attention back to the crowd downstairs waiting for his autograph.

"Ladies and gentle-wizards! Thank you all for coming out to see me on this most special occasion. I have one or two announcements before we begin the signing. To start, I would like to point out a few very special guests who I am honored to have with us. First, someone who needs no introduction ... but, *ha-Ha!*, I shall provide one anyway! Friends, I give you the Savior of our nation, the Bane of You-Know-Who, the legendary Boy-Who-Lived - *Jim Potter!*" And with that, he gestured towards the young Gryffindor and his friends up on the second floor balcony. Jim hesitated for just an instant (and Harry noticed that once again there was a flash of irritation) before the mask slipped back into place, and he smiled and waved for the loudly applauding crowd as photography bulbs flashed. Off to the side, Harry and his two Slytherin friends also applauded politely, though with just barely enough enthusiasm to ward off accusations of insincerity. Privately, Harry was fascinated to have now twice seen Jim's "*Boy-Who-Lived* mask" in action

as he interacted with fans, and he was reminded of Luna Lovegood's cryptic remarks to that very effect. He'd always assumed Jim had reveled in his fame, and perhaps he had in years past. But since Quirrell and especially since the birthday attack, it increasingly seemed that the title of "Boy-Who-Lived" was a burden that Jim no longer enjoyed shouldering.

"But, my friends," Lockhart continued, "there are many kinds of heroes. Some, like young Jim here and, of course, myself," the wizard put his hand over his heart and bowed slightly in a calculated show of humility, "boldly stand forth as beacons of hope and courage to the world at large. But others act more quietly yet no less heroically. Many of you have read of the shocking events that took place at Potter Manor not three weeks ago. But one detail which I found to be perhaps the most extraordinary was left out of that coverage, undoubtedly due to lack of space rather than any deliberate oversight by the editorial staff, I'm sure." Lockhart glanced over at the reporters from the *Prophet* who were giving one another confused looks, but then, he continued without pause.

"I have spoken to several aurors of my acquaintance about those events, and they all agree that there was very nearly a *fourth* fatality on that awful day. Rufus Scrimgeour, our esteemed Chief Auror and one of the nation's highest ranking law enforcement officials, was severely injured and would have surely died had it not been for the quick thinking and steely resolve of three young Hogwarts students, one of whom I see here with us today. Ladies and gentle-wizards, please join me in giving a round of applause to the elder brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, *Mr. Harry Potter!*"

With that, and to Harry's astonishment, Lockhart pointed right at him and then began clapping profusely, and he was quickly joined by nearly everyone in the store except Jim, who was looking back and forth between Lockhart and Harry with a mixture of shock and mild anger, an expression which remained on his face right up until it was captured on film by a photographer. At that point, Jim's media savvy kicked in, and he immediately smiled at Harry and started clapping along with everyone else.

"Boys!" yelled one of the photographers. "Get closer together so we can get you in the same shot." The two Potters were visibly reluctant to do so until Blaise and Lavender from opposite directions practically shoved them together. The cameras started flashing, and Harry summoned up the old painful fake smile he hadn't bothered to use since early in his First Year. He resolved then and there to spend time in front of a mirror practicing his smile until he could reflexively produce one that seemed genuine without making his jaw ache.

"Well," he said to Jim through his teeth, "this is just ... excruciating."

"Yeah," Jim replied through a much more practiced though no less artificial grin. "Welcome to my world, snake."

After *far* too many seconds of this, Lockhart finally spoke up, drawing the attention of the crowd back to himself.

"Yes, the sight of these two young heroes, scions of the illustrious Potter line, fills my heart with pride. Pride and excited anticipation, which brings me to my second announcement. No doubt many of you who are Hogwarts parents have noticed that several of my works are listed as required texts for Defense Against the Dark Arts in the

coming year. Perhaps you assumed that the new teacher might be one of my adoring fans, *ha-Ha!* but the truth is *even more exciting!* For I can now reveal that I, Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin (Third Class) and Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, have accepted the post of ... *Professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry* for this coming term!"

That announcement was met by gasps of surprise followed by more applause from the crowd. While Lavender seemed quite excited about the news, the other students around her clapped listlessly with barely more enthusiasm than the three Slytherins could muster for Jim earlier. For that matter, Harry and Jim didn't even clap at all. Instead, they just looked at one another, as if bonding in mutual disdain for the pretentious dandy who would be teaching what they both considered the most important class in the curriculum.

"And with that announcement out of the way, let us proceed. These books won't sign themselves, after all. Well, I suppose they can, what with magic and all, but that's not what you're here to pay for, *ha-Ha!*" With that, Lockhart moved around the table and sat down in an incredibly ostentatious throne-like chair provided by the bookstore. Then, he pulled out a massive ostrich quill pen - that had apparently been dyed blue to match the color scheme of his outfit - and waited for the first customer to step up for his autograph. That customer was Molly Weasley, and she did not have any books in her hands to sign but rather a piece of paper. Even up in the balcony, the Hogwarts logo at the top was plainly visible. Ron and Ginny both gasped, the blood draining from their faces.

"What is she *doing?*" asked Ron incredulously. Although it was too far to hear clearly, Molly was holding out the paper

to Lockhart and pointing at something on it. They did manage to make out the words "five children" from whatever she was saying.

"Oh no," said Ginny shakily. "Oh no, no, no, no, no. Please tell me this is a nightmare and I'll wake up in a minute back at the Burrow."

"What is it?" asked Jim in concern.

"Our mother ... is *arguing* with Gilderoy Lockhart ... about the expense of having to buy thirty-five DADA text books ... in front of *half of Wizarding Britain!*" the girl hissed in exasperation.

Ron put his hands over his face. "I'm just gonna stand here and be horrified with my eyes closed. Let me know when it's over."

Surprisingly, however, Lockhart did not appear in the least offended, nor was he responding in his former bombastic voice that could be heard across the store. Instead, he took the Hogwarts letter from Molly, studied it with a grave expression for a few minutes, nodded at Molly and then rose from his seat. "Ladies and gentle-wizards. I do apologize, but a matter has just been brought to my attention that must be rectified before we can proceed. Please be patient for just a few minutes more." With that, he left the table to approach the manager, Wilbur Blotts, who suddenly looked a bit nervous.

"That's it," said Ginny. "Mom is going to be dragged out of Flourish & Blotts by the aurors. I cannot imagine how this day could get more embarrassing."

"**Never** say things like that!" hissed Blaise. "I swear, I keep telling people not to tempt the gods of irony, but they don't



listen!"

"Quiet, both of you," said Harry. "This is getting interesting."

By that point, Lockhart had made his way over to Mr. Blotts and begun talking with him. They were too far away for Harry to hear anything, but the body language was fascinating. Lockhart talked reasonably with a cheerful expression on his face while gesturing amiably with his hands. Blotts suddenly looked a bit sick. Lockhart pointed to the cash register at the front of the store and then laughed as if he'd told a hilarious joke. Blotts suddenly looked a bit frightened. Lockhart put his hand on Mr. Blott's shoulder and gave him a look of polite concern as he spoke. Blotts shuddered visibly and then shook his head to say "*no*" to something. Then, Lockhart patted Mr. Blotts warmly on the back before returning to the signing desk while Blotts ran off gesturing wildly at several of his employees. Finally, Lockhart addressed the crowd.

"Ladies and Gentle-wizards, I do apologize to you all. It appears that a miscommunication has been made betwixt myself and the good Mr. Blotts that has led to an unfortunate error in the Hogwarts student letters. I take full responsibility as I am between secretaries at the moment and have allowed myself to become slapdash with my correspondence. *Please* do not hold my blunder against Mr. Blotts or his fine establishment."

With that, everyone looked at Blotts, who returned a wild glare and a slightly hysterical smile that informed all the Slytherins present and half the Ravenclaws that the "blunder" had indeed been entirely Blotts's fault and that, most likely, it was *not* a "blunder" but rather a deliberate attempt to cheat someone that had just blown up in his face. Whether he'd been cheating Lockhart, the Hogwarts

students and their parents, or all of the above was unknown. Meanwhile, Lockhart picked up one of the books from the table and held it up to the crowd.

"You see, friends, the books on sale today which I will be autographing are special editions of seven of my prior publications as well as my newest work, **Magical Me.**" Behind the man, one of the large moving pictures of Gilderoy Lockhart held up a copy of said book and smiled to the crowd while showing off the cover. The book cover *also* contained a moving picture of Gilderoy Lockhart which gave a thumbs-up gesture to the crowd. Then, the two images of Lockhart gave exaggerated winks to one another.

"In addition to new leather-bound covers and a personalized autograph by your humble wordsmith, each new edition of the books on the Hogwarts supply list also contains a special added bonus." He opened the back of the book, and from inside a pocket built into the back cover, he removed a smaller, soft-cover booklet. "Each book comes with a special removable appendix bound in a beautiful leatherette cover which provides detailed information on the various dark creatures discussed within the larger works – their histories, strengths, weaknesses and other peculiarities – as well as an in-depth discussion of each spell used within the book during the course of my efforts to bring those foul creatures to heel. It is the appendices of the seven books which are required for my future students at Hogwarts, a fact which should have been made clear in the Hogwarts supply letters but sadly was not. Now, the reason for the five-galleon retail price for each of these books - aside from the pocket part and, of course, the intrinsic value of my autograph, *ha-Ha!* - is that part of the profits from each sale will go to St. Mungo's Hospital, specifically to provide additional funding for the Janus

Thickey Long Term and Permanent Care Ward." At that, many in the crowd began to applaud Lockhart's generosity and civic spirit.

"*However*, I would never be so crass as to make any child's education conditional on a charitable donation, even to a cause as worthy as that. I realize that many of you have already purchased copies of one or more of the books on sale today in earlier editions and may not wish to purchase another copy either for charity or for the appendix. Likewise, many of you may have more than one child at Hogwarts, and it would be foolishly redundant to ask you to purchase multiple copies. For those reasons, I have arranged for copies of the various appendices to be available separately, with all seven booklets bound together into a single volume. These can be found at the front of the store, where Mr. Blotts has kindly placed them underneath the counter in a box marked 'cleaning supplies' which is also covered with a heavy sheet, no doubt to prevent them from getting dusty, I suppose. These student appendices may be purchased separately at a cost of..."

Lockhart paused at that point and snapped his fingers several times as if he'd forgotten something. "So sorry all. My mind's just like *a sieve* today! Mr. Blotts, how much are the separate appendices retailing for? Was it two galleons?" He smiled at Mr. Blotts. "Or only one?"

Blotts was silent for a second before he spoke. "One galleon, Mr. Lockhart," he said in flat, somewhat defeated voice. The crowd murmured appreciatively at the remarkably low price.

"Ah, yes. One galleon per booklet. Or five galleons per book if you want to purchase one of the complete new edition books with an appendix for that book included in the back."

He turned back to Molly and beamed at her. "*Except for you*, dear lady. For bringing this regrettable mistake to my attention, I *insist* on giving you a full copy of all seven books, plus a copy of **Magical Me**, at no cost."

Molly gasped and then giggled like a school girl.

"Now then, dear lady. To whom should I make out the inscription."

"Oh, er, make it out to Molly. Um, she's my daughter."

Up in the balcony, Harry summoned all of his reserves of Occlumency to avoid laughing out loud at that last exchange. Blaise, meanwhile, merely stroked his chin as if suddenly fascinated by the wizarding author.

"Do they have any spells we can learn at Hogwarts to erase this from my memory forever?" said Ginny.

"They're heavily restricted," said Ron bitterly. "Maybe we could just take turns hitting each other in the head with bricks until we get amnesia."

"Well, on the bright side," said Jim, "based on all his charity work and how he responded to Mrs. Weasley, he doesn't seem to be evil or anything."

"Please!" said Harry contemptuously. "All that guff only makes him *more* suspicious in my book!"

"Oh shut up, Harry," snapped Lavender. "You're just jealous of his hair!"

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After the initial Lockhart spectacle concluded, Harry, Blaise and Theo quickly became bored with watching middle-aged

housewives ask for autographs from the man, all the while gushing madly about how noble and courageous he was, and so they withdrew to a private reading room to discuss their observations. Harry thought Lockhart was a fraud and a con-man, while Blaise was convinced there was more to him than met the eye. For his part, Theo was confident that the man was neither a Death Eater nor a clever disguise for the Dark Lord himself, which could only be a step up from what they'd had the year before. After an hour, the trio went down stairs to complete their purchases and hand Theo off to the Malfoys for the remainder of Summer break. It was at that point that Harry learned that he'd completely missed all the real excitement.

"*What do you MEAN Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley got into a fistfight?!*" he exclaimed to Hermione in complete astonishment.

"Exactly what I said," Hermione replied. "Malfoy and son crossed paths with the Weasleys and Jim as they were leaving. Words were exchanged on the topic of what makes a '*respectable wizard*,' and the next thing I knew, the two were rolling around on the floor while Draco, Jim, Ron and the Twins were cheering them on and Ginny and Percy were just standing there aghast. I don't know if it made things better or worse when Hagrid showed up and separated them by *literally* grabbing them each by the scruff of the neck. Mr. Malfoy then said a few unkind remarks about everyone's relative income levels and then stormed out followed by Draco who stopped just long enough to ask me to let Theo know that they'd be waiting at Summerisle's and to not be late for dinner."

"That. Makes. No. Sense!" Harry exclaimed.

"Of course it does," said Blaise affably. "It's quarter of five and Summerisle's doesn't take walk-in diners after six."

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I ...!" Harry's exclamation stopped abruptly as he saw Blaise's mischievous grin.

"You *know* what I mean. Lucius Lord Malfoy, head of the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy? Getting into a fistfight with Arthur Weasley in a crowded public store? It's ridiculous!"

"Why?" asked Neville rather crossly. "What's wrong with Arthur Weasley that he's not good enough to punch Lucius Malfoy in the face?!"

"That's not ... *What?!'*" Harry rubbed his temples for a few seconds before continuing more calmly. "Neville, I can hardly even count all the things wrong with that sentence. First of all, Mr. Weasley could lose his job by assaulting a Lord of the Wizengamot. Second, Malfoy is Lord of an Ancient and Noble House. People like that don't get into bare-knuckle brawls *anywhere*. If Malfoy had *hired an assassin* to murder Mr. Weasley, it would have been more plausible than the two getting into a fistfight like common street thugs. And thirdly, it's not that Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy don't travel in the same social circles. It's more like they're not even in the same social plane. It would be like me challenging the waiter at Fortescue's to a duel because he forgot to bring me a spoon with my ice cream."

"Actually, Harry," interrupted Blaise, "the two aren't *that* far apart. Mr. Weasley does sit on the Wizengamot. He's got one vote by virtue of his office and another for that Order of Merlin he got for his role in bringing Erasmus Wilkes to justice. He's also the Chairman of the Wizengamot Muggle Affairs Committee. And believe it or not, the Weasleys *are* a Noble family."

"No they're not!" Potter countered. "I know those rolls like the back of my hand by this point, and the Weasleys aren't on it."

"You know the *active* rolls, Harry," said Neville. "They don't get a *vote* because the family isn't rich and doesn't have enough money to pay the annual dues on their seat. But Mr. Weasley is indeed entitled to many of the privileges of being Head of a Noble family."

"How much are the dues?" Hermione asked.

"Fifty-thousand galleons a year for a Noble family, and a hundred-thousand for one that's Ancient and Noble," said Theo causing Hermione to gasp in surprise.

"Exactly. The Weasleys can't afford to pay to keep their seat active," added Blaise. "Nor can any other family pay the dues for them and gain their support because Mr. Weasley suffers from that most foul and pernicious of social diseases known as '*honesty*.' So their seat sits empty even as Lords Crabbe, Goyle and Parkinson exercise their votes however Lord Malfoy directs because they've sworn fealty to his House."

Harry inhaled slowly and shook his head. "No. No, there's something more going on. Draco and Ron nearly got into a fight on the train ride to Hogwarts our first year and it was obvious that they'd never even met each other before." He turned to Theo.

"Theo, I have a mission for you."

The other boy's eyebrows shot up, and he smirked at his friend. "Agent Nott, reporting for duty, sir. What do you need?"

"When you get back to Malfoy Manor, check out their library for any references to the Weasleys, anything in the past history of the two families that might explain their current and wholly irrational disdain for each other."

Theo snapped to attention and gave Harry a military salute. "Aye-aye, Captain."

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. "Oh joy," she said. "You're developing your own *spy network* now. All we need are wristwatch communicators and an Aston Martin, and we'll be ready to take on SPECTRE." Harry and all the other Purebloods just looked at her blankly. "*Never mind!* I'm not about to waste the rest of the day explaining James Bond to you lot. Get Justin to do it."

With that, the Muggleborn turned and went back into Flourish & Blotts to finish her shopping, brushing past a bemused Justin Finch-Fletchley who had arrived just in time for the end of that conversation. He turned back to his young friends. "Right-O. So there's this Muggle chap who works as an agent for Her Majesty's Secret Service. His name is Bond. James Bond."

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: I'm coming to love Justin Finch-Fletchley. I'm writing him as someone coming from a very long line of "upper class British twits" who could very easily have gone to Eton and become a Muggle Draco. But instead, he goes to Hogwarts where he is surprised to find that he's part of a disliked and discriminated-against minority group and, as a result, develops depth and empathy.



# Modes of Transportation

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 13: Modes of Transportation

### *1 September 1992*

By September 1st, Neville Longbottom had become fairly competent at Potions and Transfiguration, while Harry Potter had become equally proficient at swimming, though he *still* didn't have a tan. At 10:30 a.m., the two young wizards along with Lady Augusta activated a portkey that transported them to a secluded alleyway across the street from King's Cross Station. Harry and Neville each carried a shoulder bag containing, among other things, their shrunken school trunks. Neville also carried a small sealed terrarium containing Trevor the Somewhat Poisonous Toad. The boy had decided that Trevor made a perfectly decent pet so long as no one handled him without wearing gloves and he wasn't allowed run of the school.

As they made their way to Platform 9¾, the two encountered several fellow students along their families. Harry also noticed that the Lovegood girl was there along with her father, Xenophilius, who was busy talking to several other parents about his newspaper, *The Quibbler*. While Neville was talking with some of their Gryffindor friends, Harry walked over to say hello to the girl.

"Good morning, Miss Lovegood. I hope you're recovered from Jim's party."

"I am, Mr. Potter, thank you."

"Please, call me Harry."

"Only if you will call me Luna."

He bowed slightly. "Luna it is."

She smiled at that. "I'm glad to hear it. I've found for some reason that most people mispronounce my name regularly. It's most vexing, but I don't want to seem rude by correcting them."

Harry's eyes narrowed. Surely, the girl knew that people were mocking her by calling her "Loony Lovegood," but for some reason, she was refusing to acknowledge it. Whether it was shyness, insecurity or "the nargles" responsible, Harry didn't think it would result in a happy experience at Hogwarts. In a sense, being Sorted into Slytherin was an advantage for him because everyone just assumed that everyone *else* was gaming out power scenarios from Day One. Draco Malfoy aside, there was surprisingly little overt bullying in-house because you never knew who was really weak and defenseless as opposed to intentionally flying under the radar until it was time for a power play, a fact he'd made abundantly clear to the whole House on Halloween of the previous year. Even though the House was riddled with Death Eater sympathizers, Draco and his flunkies had been the only ones to ever seriously threaten him, as ineffectual as those threats turned out to be.

"It's hardly rude, I think, to insist that people use your *proper name*, Luna," Harry said gently. "You're not doing yourself or other people any favors by letting them misunderstand who you are." At that, she gave him an unreadable expression, so he shrugged and changed the subject. "So, what House do you think you're going into?"

"Probably Ravenclaw. Both my parents went there." It was hard to read Luna's moods, but Harry thought she was not overly enthused by that prospect, and he politely said so.

"Well," she replied, "I really don't know *where* I'll fit in best. Following in my parents' footsteps seems the most logical course. If nothing else, it will make Daddy happy."

"Luna, you should never let something as important as your Sorting be governed by a desire to please others. I don't want to spoil the surprise of how you get Sorted ..."

"It's a Hat. Daddy told me when I was a little girl."

He sighed. "So much for cherished school traditions. Anyway, the Sorting Hat is wise and knows its job. Listen to its advice."

She crooked an eyebrow at him. "Even if it wants to send me into Slytherin House?"

"That depends, I suppose, on whether you really believe in, um, nergles and wreckspots...?"

"Nargles and wrackspurts," she said amiably.

"Yes those. Anyway, on whether you believe they're *real*, or whether you just talk about them all the time to discomfit other people and keep them off-balance."

"Why can't it be both?" she asked in what certainly *sounded* like innocent naivete.

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it before spending several seconds *really* studying Luna Lovegood. "You're a mischievous little pixie, aren't you," he said with a chuckle.

"Personally, I hope you go into Gryffindor. You'd drive my brother to distraction."

She tilted her head as if too see him from a different angle. "You've seen his *mask*, haven't you, Harry Potter. You've noticed the seams where the Boy-Who-Lived face fits over Jim's real one."

Harry was taken aback at that. As far as he could recall, Luna had not been at Flourish & Blotts, but the fact that she'd echoed his thoughts about Jim from that day was eerie. "I ... don't know. Maybe. But we all have masks of one sort or another, don't we? I learned that much my first week in Slytherin."

"We do all have masks, Harry Potter. But yours fits you like a velvet glove, so soft that your wrackspurts are dozing away most of the time, even though you have more than most people. Jim's mask is hard and brittle and screwed on so tight that it must hurt every time he smiles."

"That's an ... evocative way to put it, Luna. But I have enough trouble pursuing happiness for myself without worrying about my brother's self-inflicted wounds."

Luna smiled sadly and then glanced over his shoulder. "Speaking of your brother, I see him coming. I'd better get on board the train before you two start arguing and I faint again. It was very embarrassing."

"Of course. I'll most likely be in a compartment with Blaise Zabini, Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom if you'd care to join us."

"I'd like that," She gave Harry a funny little curtsy and then ran to join her father and heading through the barrier.

Harry watched her until he was distracted by Jim's arrival, along with that of the Weasleys, all of whom looked out of breath. Apparently, James and Lily had once again fobbed Jim off on the Weasleys while they attended to their jobs, and the Weasleys, who were never a model of efficiency, had nearly missed the train. Harry told Neville to head on and get a compartment as he wanted to grab a newspaper from the nearby stand for the trip. The other boy nodded and made his way through the barrier with his grandmother. In fact, Harry wanted to take the opportunity to needle Jim some more, and he assumed Neville would disapprove.

"Hello, Jim. So glad you could make it. Don't worry. We still have seconds before the train leaves. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, it's so wonderful to see you again! I've missed your delightful cooking so much!"

"And we've missed yours, Harry, dear," Molly said with a smile. Jim nearly growled at the affection Molly showed his brother. As they talked, Percy and the Twins passed by, waving quick but cheery hellos as they did, while pushing large carts for their trunks and other possessions as fast as they could through the barrier. Unfortunately, Ron was moving a bit too quickly, and some of the luggage on his cart slipped off.

"Thanks, Ron," said Ginny angrily. "My trunk is already a hand-me-down. I don't need it to break into pieces before we even get to Hogwarts."

"We wouldn't even be late if *you* hadn't made us go back for your precious *diary*," Ron spat at her.

"*Ronald*, be nice to your sister!" Molly exclaimed. Ron gave a surly apology as he started to repack the cart.

"We'd better get on through the barrier, Molly," said Arthur. "We daren't leave the Twins unattended. They'll probably set fire to the Malfoys or something."

"Oh, like you wouldn't *enjoy* that, Arthur Weasley!" she replied irritably. "Don't think I've forgotten about that *spectacle* you made of yourself at Flourish & Blotts!" With that, the two passed through the barrier, leaving Harry, Jim, Ron and Ginny behind. Harry sighed and tried to help Ron with the trunks.

"I don't need any help, snake!" Ron growled.

"Oh, we're back to '*snake*,' are we? Last time I buy *you* any Quidditch books! Anyway, I figured I might as well help since my brother is just standing their gawking. Or perhaps he's waiting for *Slappy* to show up and load the trunks for him."

"There is no *Slappy*, okay!" Jim snapped. "It was just something stupid the publishers came up with because ..."

"Because the books that were plagiarized to make the *Boy-Who-Lived Adventures* were Muggle novels about a pair of brothers, and they needed a second character to fill in for the missing one so they invented a comical house elf sidekick. After all, it wasn't as though you had an actual brother or anything to appear alongside you."

"Are you actually *jealous* that you're not a character in one of those stupid children's books written about me?!" Jim said in amazement.

Harry started to respond but was interrupted by Ginny. "Hey guys! I know it's wonderful to listen to you two snipe at each other like this because I *never* have to listen to sibling rivalry from my brothers at home *but* ... shouldn't I

be able to pass through the wall somewhere around here to get to the platform?" And with that she put her hand up to the barrier and knocked on it. It was noticeably solid. Harry walked over to where she stood. It was the exact same area where he'd just seen Mr. and Mrs. Weasley pass through, but now it actually felt like the solid brick wall it appeared to be.

"Okay, that's ... weird." He looked around. "Would there be any Ministry personnel around in case there's a problem with the barrier?"

"No," said Jim as he came over to inspect the wall himself, "because there's never been a problem with this wall in all the time that Platform 9¾ has existed."

"Well, there's one now," said Ginny. "What do you think is causing it? And are Mom and Dad stuck on the other side? I don't want to miss the train!"

Harry frowned and then opened up his book bag and started digging through it. As he did, Jim suddenly looked around the Muggle-filled concourse with a nervous look on his face.

"We need to get out of here," he said quietly but urgently.

"What?" Harry asked sharply. "Why? In a minute or two, the Weasleys or some of the other parents on the other side of the barrier will come back through. Or if they can't come through, they'll alert someone at the Ministry by magical means that there's a problem. We just need to stay calm..."

"No!" exclaimed Jim forcefully. "Don't you get it? In the last two months, someone's tried to kill me once and you twice! And now, we're stuck here at King's Cross on the wrong side of the barrier with no other wizards to help us? It's got

to be a trap!" He turned to Ron. "We need to get away from this place and up to Hogwarts as fast as possible. Any ideas? "

"Well," said Ron hesitantly, "I guess we could take the Anglia."

"No!" said Ginny angrily. "That's crazy! You can't just steal Dad's car and drive it to Scotland!"

"Well, of course not," said Ron indignantly. "We'd be flying!"

Ginny stared at her brother, completely gobsmacked. Meanwhile, Harry spoke up. "Ron, that is absolutely the..." He paused and blinked repeatedly. "... the single most *brilliant* idea I have ever heard. I take back every bad thing I've ever said about you. Flying a magical Ford Anglia from London to Scotland is *definitely* the smartest and cleverest solution to this problem, and frankly, I can't imagine *any way* in which it might go wrong."

"Really?" Ron said. "You mean it? So does that mean you're coming with us?"

Harry snorted. "Of course not! Flying to Scotland is a Gryffindor plan. Being a Slytherin, I have my own way to get to Hogwarts. A sneaky snakey way that no Gryffindor would *ever dare to consider*." He smiled. "In fact, I imagine I'll get there before you and have a camera waiting to take a picture of your crash landing. *Impressive landing!* That's what I meant to say: Incredibly impressive landing ... of your dad's stolen car."

"Harry, shut up!" Jim interrupted. "Ron, ignore him. He's only trying to use reverse psychology on us to talk us out of taking the car. Ginny, are you coming with us or staying here?"



"I'm not coming with you, *and you shouldn't be doing this!* Ron, please *think!*"

Ron looked over to Jim. "We can't just leave her here."

"Maybe it's for the best," said Jim thoughtfully. "She might be in greater danger if she's with us. And once we're gone, maybe the barrier will work again." He turned to the increasingly exasperated girl and put his hands on her shoulders in what was doubtless meant to be a reassuring manner. "Ginny, wait here for your mum and dad. Tell them what's happened and that we're on our way to Hogwarts. Tell them not to worry and that we'll get the car back to them as soon as we can."

With that Ron pulled Ginny's now slightly dented trunk off the trolley, and then he and Jim quickly wheeled their luggage away from Platform 9¾ and back to the parking lot, leaving behind an amused Harry Potter and an increasingly furious Ginny Weasley. They were already out of sight before she finally regained the power of speech.

"Of all the arrogant, conceited, patronizing, chauvinistic ...! Wait here for your mum and dad like a helpless damsel while we *steal a magic car and fly it to Hogwarts! WHO THE HELL DOES HE THINK HE IS?!*"

Harry coughed softly. "The Boy-Who-Lived, maybe?" Then, he laughed. "You know, what's really funny is that the Git actually saw through my reverse psychology *the one time* I was genuinely trying to help him instead of take advantage of him."

And with that, Harry sat down on Ginny's trunk and resumed digging through his book bag.

"What are you doing?" Ginny asked as she followed him over.

"Sending a message to Hermione Granger so she can let the prefects know what's going on. Presumably there's someone on the train who can contact the authorities and inform them of what's happened. Surely they don't pack several hundred children on a magic train without any adult supervision at all and no way to send messages for help." Then, he stopped and looked up. "And having said that out loud, I immediately realize how naive that sounds."

He shrugged and then resumed digging as Ginny sat down next to him. "So you *were* just bluffing. You're going to wait here for help to arrive."

"Certainly not! I'm going to message Hermione, and then, I'm going to Hogwarts." He looked over to the girl and smiled. "Via the sneaky snakey way."

She was silent for a few seconds as Harry finally found the parchment that was linked to the one in Hermione's possession. "Can I come too?" she asked hesitantly.

He looked at her with a serious expression. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly. She nodded. "Very well, Miss Weasley. And yes, that is the first thing you must understand. For if you follow me on the Slytherin Path, you must follow Slytherin ways. From now on, I am Mr. Potter and you are Miss Weasley, until we reach Hogwarts and, after a suitable interval, formally give each other permission to use our first names in public. Do you understand?"

She nodded quickly.

"Gooood," he drawled in a silky voice. "The other thing you must understand is this: There is a *price* to be paid for

accompanying me on this journey." She swallowed nervously. That nice boy who gave her a glass of water after her late night Quidditch practice was now kind of ... sinister.

"You have *knowledge*, Miss Weasley," he continued, his voice deepening. "Knowledge that I am particularly interested in acquiring. Knowledge that you must impart as the price for joining me."

Her eyes widened in fear. "Wh ... what knowledge?" she said almost in a whisper.

Harry leaned in closer and spoke softly but intently, as the girl was transfixed by the brilliant green of his eyes. "Your brothers, Fred and George. Which one has the mole next to his left eye?"

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### ***Minutes earlier ...***

Hermione, Neville, Theo and Blaise were sharing a compartment discussing their thoughts on the upcoming year (and also waiting for an unusually tardy Harry Potter) when there was a commotion outside. Hermione slid the door open and immediately realized that it was Luna Lovegood, who was being accosted by that obnoxious Edgecombe girl who'd been at the party - the one Harry had warded off like a vampire confronted with garlic merely by suggesting that she reminded him of Vincent Crabbe.

"I don't know why you're looking for Harry Potter, Loony! He won't be any more interested in your ridiculous nonsense than anybody else!"

"Well, I'm looking for him because he specifically asked me to find him on the train, which, I think, refutes your statement. And by the way, it's 'Lun-ah.' With an A on the

end. I can spell my whole name if it will help." Hermione was amused. From Luna's cheery tone, she honestly wasn't sure if the girl was being sarcastic or genuinely believed that Edgecombe had been confused about how to pronounce her name.

"Nobody cares about your name, Loony. Just like nobody cares about your crazy father or his stupid newspaper or all those ridiculous creatures you're always spouting off about!"

"Hem-hem!" The two girls turned towards Hermione who was standing with her arms folded like a disapproving teacher, with the three boys standing behind her. "Actually, I suddenly find myself intensely interested in hearing more about those creatures Miss Lovegood is always spouting off about. Why don't you come into our compartment, Miss Lovegood, and tell me more. I find your ideas intriguing and wish to subscribe to your newsletter."

At that, Blaise suddenly burst out laughing, while Theo and Neville smiled both at his strange reaction as well as the look on Marietta Edgecombe's face.

"Excuse me," said Edgecombe harshly. "This is a private conversation you're butting into. Who do you think you *are* anyway?"

"Hermione Granger, Gryffindor, Second Year. And if I remember correctly, you're that Crabbe girl from the Potter birthday party."

The other girl's face contorted in fury. "My *name* is Marietta Edgecombe. Of the Grovesford Park Edgecombes. And I don't have to take lip from some uppity Mudblood."

Instantly, the smiles vanished from the three boys, while Hermione raised her chin defiantly as she prepared a crushing comeback. To her annoyance, someone beat her to it.

"Um, excuse me. Hi there. I'm Theo Nott of the Ancient and Noble House of Nott. Perhaps you've heard of us? I'm Pureblooded going back twelve generations. Does that give me sufficient pedigree to tell you to *bugger off*!?"

Hermione turned towards Theo in surprise at his harsh language. Meanwhile, Neville stepped forward as well. "And I'm Longbottom of Longbottom. And while decorum prevents me using those particular words," he gestured towards Theo with his thumb, "*what he said*!"

Marietta made a face like a bulldog on the verge of a tantrum and then turned and flounced away. Hermione shook her head in amazement. Before Marietta Edgecombe, she had never met anyone who actually flounced in real life. She held out her hand to welcome Luna into their compartment where everyone sat back down just in time for the rocking sensation that let them know the train had commenced its journey.

"Boys, it's not that I don't appreciate the gesture – although, Theo, I don't think I approve of saying '*bugger off*' to a fellow student – but I am quite capable of standing up to Pureblood bigotry, especially coming from a First Year who hasn't even been Sorted yet. Oh, and Dear God in Heaven, *please* don't let that harriidan be Sorted into Gryffindor!"

"She won't be," said Blaise. "The Edgecombes have all been Ravenclaws for four generations. They think it gives them the illusion of intellectual heft without actually learning to

think for themselves." The other children stared at him. "What? It was in the dossier my mother gave me on this year's incoming class. And also, what's so bad about saying '*bugger off*'? We're all twelve except for Miss Lovegood here. That's basically young adult in the wizarding world."

"Even if that were so," replied Hermione in what sounded eerily like Professor McGonagall's voice minus the Scottish accent, "that would only be a further argument against using vulgarities like '*bugger*' in casual speech. And anyway, we've wandered from my original point which is that I am quite capable of standing up to the Marietta Edgecombes of the world without needing any of you lot to protect me, chivalrous though it might be. And what's all this about '*dossiers*'?! First Neville, now you? Do all Purebloods start Hogwarts with a box of *dossiers* about all their classmates?"

"I didn't get any dossiers either," said Theo. "Father couldn't be *buggered* to make any for me. And it's not about chivalry, either. You're on Team Harry, just like the rest of us. We stick up for each other whether it's against rampaging dark lords or flouncing firsties."

"She did flounce, didn't she?" marveled Neville. "I thought girls only did that in books."

Hermione sighed. "Fine, fine. Anyway, speaking of Harry, where *is* the center of our collective universe?" At that moment, there was a soft ding from within the large beaded purse sitting next to the girl. "Humph. Speak of the devil." She opened the purse and said in a clear voice "Harry's Parchment," causing a folded piece of paper to shoot up into her hand.

Neville's eyes widened. "How did you do that? You didn't even use a wand!"

"I knitted runes into the lining of my purse. You don't need a wand for runic magic."

The boys looked at one another in confusion. "We haven't *studied* runes yet," said Blaise heatedly. "That class starts in Third Year."

"Yes, I know, but I got bored in France this Summer so I started reading ahead." With that, she unfolded the parchment and read Harry's message, her eyes widening as she did.

"Bugger," Hermione said without a trace of irony.

"*Language*, Hermione!" said Neville with a laugh.

---

Minutes later, having advised Hermione of his situation, Harry exited Kings Cross, gallantly carrying Ginny's trunk for her. The girl was plainly nervous. She had no idea what "the Slytherin Path" was but from how mysteriously Harry was acting, she was increasingly concerned that it was something illegal and quite possibly something that required Dark Magic. So she was naturally surprised when he stopped at a street corner a block away from the train station, pulled out his wand, and made an upwards motion with it. Within seconds, a purple triple-decker bus arrived in a blur of motion, startling Ginny. To be honest, Harry seemed a bit surprised as well.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. My name is Stan Shunpike and I will be your conductor today." The young wizard looked up from the card he was reading and smiled at Harry. "Oi! I remember you! You were that sprog we had to go all the way out to Surrey for! 'Zat where we're headed today?"

"No, Stan," said Harry as he handed over Ginny's trunk. "Just to the Leaky Cauldron. By the way, wasn't this bus *red* last time I saw it?"

"Ministry made us change it. Apparently, our '*British charm and eccentricity*' somehow allowed American tourists to see through the normal Muggle-Repellin' Charms, and they kept trying to climb on board and ask for sightseeing tours. Just the Yanks, though. Very strange. Anywho, the Ministry made us repaint the whole bleedin' thing in this special Muggle-Repellin' Paint. Don't like it me-self. We look like a giant grape on wheels."

Harry laughed at that and held out his hand for Ginny to help her onto the bus.

"So what now?" she asked. "Is there someone in Diagon Alley who can help us get to Hogwarts?"

"No, we won't be going all the way into the Alley. There's a fireplace in the Leakey Cauldron, and we'll just Floo through to Hogsmeade and then walk to the castle."

She stopped and stared at Harry. "*That's* the mysterious Slytherin Path? Take the Floo to Hogsmeade?"

He sniffed. "The Slytherin Path is the path of least resistance and greatest advantage. As opposed to the Gryffindor Path, or as I like to call it, the Path of '*LOOK AT ME!*'" As he said that, Harry held up both hands with his fingers splayed wide and shook them in a manner that Hermione might have described as *jazz hands*. "You see, Miss Weasley, the Gryffindors are the House of the Brave. And bravery is a good thing, but not when it trumps all other concerns. In any given situation, the first instinct of a Gryffindor is to look for a solution that shows off how bold he is, just as the Ravenclaw will first look for a solution that



shows off how clever he is. The Slytherins, however, look for the solution that produces the best results."

"And the Hufflepuffs?"

"I actually have a lot of respect for Hufflepuffs. They also tend to look for the most efficient solution. They're just ham-strung because they ignore any efficient or advantageous solutions that might possibly hurt someone's feelings or that might seem unfair or unethical to other people. In many ways, a Hufflepuff is just a Slytherin with an overdeveloped sense of fair play. Or maybe a Slytherin is just a ruthless Hufflepuff. Amounts to the same thing really."

She laughed, and the two chatted amiably about wizarding ethics while trying to ignore the insane recklessness with which the Knight Bus careened through the streets of London.

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Ten minutes later, back on the Hogwarts Express, Hermione was beginning to have second thoughts. True, she had freely expressed an interest in Luna's strange (and likely non-existent) creatures, but she had not been prepared for just how convoluted the girl's fantasies were, and she was almost to the point of reevaluating Marietta Edgecombe's views on the subject of Miss Lovegood's sanity. Fortunately, just as Luna was about to expound some more on the vile machinations of the Rotfang Conspiracy, Hermione was rescued by a knock on the compartment door, followed by Lavender Brown entering in a huff.

"Hi guys. Sorry to intrude, but have any of you seen Jim?" she asked in a frustrated tone. "Because if he's avoiding me, I'll just *have* to make his life miserable."

"He's not on the train," said Hermione. "I am reliably informed that he and Ron missed it and are traveling to Hogwarts via a flying car they've acquired."

"Ha-ha, very funny. Seriously, where is he?" Lavender said irritably.

"She's telling the truth, Lavender," said Neville earnestly.

"But that shouldn't stop you from making Jim's life miserable," said Blaise. "In fact, since he's out breaking the Statute of Secrecy as we speak, you should probably make his life *even more miserable*."

"Blaise," said Hermione, "stop instigating."

"A flying car? Really, a flying car?" said Lavender in disbelief. "Fine, whatever. Is Harry with him? Surely he has too much sense for that!"

"He isn't and he does," said Hermione. "Unfortunately, he also missed the train, but his plan for getting to Hogwarts is much more sensible."

"I should hope so," Lavender replied. "Anyway, when you see Harry, let him know we need to talk about this."

She handed Hermione a copy of *Teen Witch Weekly* which featured a moving picture of Harry looking surprised, Jim glaring angrily at Harry, and Lavender standing between them clapping and looking excitedly at Harry. Hermione recognized the scene from Flourish & Blotts, but she was startled by both the headline – *Boy-Who-Lived caught in love triangle!* – and the accompanying article, which insinuated that Jim's apparent anger was the result of Lavender's attention turning towards Harry, presumably because of his reliance on hair care products supplied by

the House of Brown. Hermione looked up at Lavender in astonishment.

"This is ..."

"Nonsense. Yes, I know. But we still need to respond to it. I'll be damned if I get a dozen Howlers tomorrow morning calling me a *scarlet woman* or something!" And with that, Lavender turned and left the compartment. Even with the door closed, however, the group could still hear the girl ranting to herself. "*Honestly! A flying car?! No inheritance is worth this!*"

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Not long after, the Knight Bus arrived at the Leaky Cauldron. Harry led Ginny inside and to the fireplace, where he dropped a few galleons into the jar and took a pinch of Floo powder with his hand. Ginny did likewise.

"Now, we're going to '*The Tonks Clinic. Hogsmeade.*' Say that back to me. As my brother has shown, poor enunciation when Floo-traveling can get you flung off to who knows where." She nodded and repeated the destination. The two passed through without incident and arrived at the Tonks clinic and residence, where they were met by Iris.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harry Potter Sir! What a pleasant surprise! Are you ill or in any pain? Iris regrets that Master Healer Tonks is in with a patient at the moment."

"That's quite alright, Iris, we're just passing through. Something happened to block the barrier at Kings Cross and we couldn't get through, so we had to find alternate transportation."

Iris stepped forward and *sniffed* both of them. Then, she made a soft growling noise. "It was that wicked Dobby Elf,

sir! Iris recognizes the scent of his magic!"

"Really? House elves can recognize each other's magic by smell?"

"Not usually, sir. As Iris said, some wicked elves act at odds with their masters. *They* give off a smell that any other house elf can spot a mile away. Those who are acting on their masters' orders leave no trace of their passage."

"Hmm. I *guess* that makes sense. Well, anyway, we'll be heading up to the castle. Please let Healer Tonks know that I came by and am sorry I missed him."

"Iris will do so. Does Mr. Harry Potter Sir wish Iris to send the young lady's trunk on to Hogwarts? And for that matter, does Mr. Harry Potter Sir wish Iris to repair the damage to it?"

Harry looked over at Ginny, who was still staring goggle-eyed at Iris (as she'd never actually seen a house elf before) and then back at Iris.

"Yes, please. We'd be very grateful."

Iris curtsied, and then she and the trunk disappeared to Ginny's surprise. She and Harry left for Hogwarts. On the way, Harry told Ginny about Dobby and asked that she not repeat the elf's name, lest he be punished or even killed by the Malfoys. She readily agreed. About fifteen minutes later, the two arrived at the castle gates and were met at the door by a scowling Severus Snape.

"Mr. Potter. You're quite a bit ahead of schedule I think. Too special to ride the Express with your peers?"

Harry ignored the dig. "We had another '*Dobby*' incident, sir. The barrier at Kings Cross was blocked and we had to improvise. How did you know I'd be coming this way?"

"One of the Hogwarts house elves informed the Headmaster that Miss Weasley's trunk had been sent on ahead from Hogsmeade. Soon after, the Headmaster sensed your passage through the outer Hogwarts' wards and he sent word to me. Now, tell me everything that happened."

Harry complied, telling everything he could remember, including Jim and Ron's impulsive decision to take the Anglia without permission and fly it to Hogwarts. Snape said he would attend to it. The slightly vicious smile he gave, however, suddenly made Ginny concerned for both her brother and Jim, neither of whom she wanted to get into trouble. Harry reassured her that it was better for both of them if the situation were resolved quickly rather than risk a catastrophic breach of the Statute of Secrecy by letting them fly all the way to Scotland, especially a breach that might reflect poorly on Arthur Weasley, the owner of the highly illegal car. He also said that she was free to lay all the blame for tattling on him since, after all, he *was* the one who gleefully tattled on them.

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"I'm sorry, Luna," said Hermione. "I really don't want to be ... disrespectful of your beliefs. But I also don't really see any reason to think those beliefs are true. I mean ... nargles are tiny little invisible buzzing things that effect people's emotional responses? And wrackspurts are some other kind of invisible, intangible insectoid life forms that live *inside* people's brains and are the reason people get upset when exposed to frustration or strong emotions? And only *you* can perceive them?"

"Well, I'd always assumed there were other people who could see them but not many. My mother told me what they were when I was a little girl, so I assumed that she could see them too." Then, Luna looked a little sad and bashful. "Though, to be honest, she did tell me about them in the context of bed-time stories when I was three or four, so that's not the most authoritative source, I guess."

"You know, Hermione," interrupted Theo, "there's all kinds of obscure magic in the world that we'll probably never learn about unless we pursue a relevant Mastery. And there *is* precedent for magical creatures that only some people can see."

"Like what," she asked doubtfully.

"*Thestrals*," he replied with a slight edge in his voice. "The creatures that pulled the carriages when we left Hogwarts for the train station last June."

"I didn't know there were invisible creatures pulling the carriages. I thought they'd just been enchanted."

"Lucky you," Theo said bitterly. "Though from what I've heard, that may change this year."

"Theo," said Blaise forcefully. "That was uncalled for. And none of that is Hermione's fault, so don't take it out on her."

Theo didn't respond but just turned to look out the window as the scenery passed by. Hermione looked at the others, wondering what she'd said to upset the boy so. Finally, Neville spoke.

"Hermione, thestrals are real. I've never seen them myself and hope I don't for a long, long time, but Gran told me that there's a whole flock of them living in the Forbidden Forest

at Hogwarts. They're ..." He glanced over at Theo sadly. "They're invisible except to people who've seen someone die up close and been old enough to understand the significance of what they've witnessed."

Theo spoke again without turning back from the window. "A thestral has a skeletal horse's body, like a stallion that's been starved to the point you can count its ribs. It's got a face like some kind of lizard, and great leathery bat-wings. It looks like the sort of horse that Death would ride. Maybe he does."

The rest of the students went silent, as they contemplated what it meant that their friend could see them. Hermione was particularly troubled, for she'd seen the auror George Wyndham die in front of her at Harry and Jim's birthday party. If what Neville said was true, she'd soon see for herself if Theo's description was accurate. Then, she noticed the sad expression on Luna's face and recalled what Ginny had said – that Luna had seen her mother die in front of her at the age of eight. She too would see the thestrals for herself. Hermione took a deep breath.

"Alright then, that's quite enough about the nargles and wrackspurts, I think," she said energetically as if to dispel the gloom that had settled over the compartment. "Tell me more about Blibbering Humdingers!"

Luna smiled.

---

The Anglia had been airborne for three hours. They couldn't see the train anymore, as the car's flight speed was no match the Hogwarts Express. Making matters worse, the invisibility effect failed about two hours into the journey, so Ron had to take detours every time the Express passed

through a Muggle-populated area. Both boys had become somewhat irritable, as neither had brought any food, and Ron refused to land so they could find a loo because the flying gear was sticking and he was afraid they wouldn't get airborne again. After the third time Jim raised the subject, Ron snapped and told him to look in the back seat because there might be an empty Butterbeer bottle he could use. After that, Jim didn't speak again and, in fact, fell asleep, leaving an annoyed Ron to drive by himself with no one to talk to.

Suddenly, Jim was awoken by a sharp rapping sound on the window his head was leaning against. He cried out and fumbled for his wand, certain it was Death Eaters or insane house elves. But it was something far, far worse – James Potter, in full auror regalia and riding a broomstick, with an expression of absolute fury on his face. The elder Potter shifted his angry gaze from Jim to a petrified Ron. He stabbed his index finger in Ron's direction and then stabbed it again towards the ground. Ron gave Jim a sick look and shifted gears to head in for a landing. Jim swallowed, wondering how angry his parents were and whether his father had the power to assign him detentions.

On the bright side, at least he'd get to take a wee.

## Chapter End Notes

**AN 3:** *"I find your ideas intriguing and wish to subscribe to your newsletter"* is an anachronism, as the *Simpsons* episode in which it first appears ("The Mountains of Madness") did not air until 1997 during Season Eight. I don't care. I think it's one of the funniest one-liners to appear on network television in my lifetime and it fits this scene so perfectly that I couldn't stand to cut it. So just assume that in this AU,



Harry is a Slytherin with a twin brother who everyone thinks is the Boy-Who-Lived ... *and* "The Mountains of Madness" aired early enough for Hermione and Blaise to have seen it. Lord knows that won't be the biggest change to canon we've seen. :)

# **Ginny's Day (Pt 1)**

## **CHAPTER 14: Ginny's Day (Pt. 1)**

***2 September 1992, 7:00 a.m.***

### ***(The First Morning)***

Ginny awoke suddenly and stared at the ceiling in wonder. For a second, she wasn't sure where she was and briefly wondered whether the previous day - and night - had been a long strange dream.

"Good morning, Ginevra," said a dorm-mate with a cheerfully nasal voice. Ginny closed her eyes. No, it had not been a dream.

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***1 September 1992, 6:45 p.m.***

### ***(The Sorting Ceremony)***

When the rest of Ginny's class arrived by the edge of the lake for the boat ride over to the castle, she was already there to greet them in her school robes. She estimated about thirty-five students in her year - smaller than Ron's class but quite a bit bigger than Percy's. As Ginny and Luna got together to discuss their separate journeys, Luna introduced the girl to two other First Years: Tori and Colin. Tori, who Ginny had met briefly at the Potter Birthday fete, was a bubbly, hyperactive girl with lustrous black hair in an attractive bob cut who was incredibly excited about going into Hufflepuff. Colin was a bubbly, hyperactive boy with curly blond hair ... and a camera he insisted on using to take a picture of every single thing that crossed his path.

Ginny noticed a few odd looks thrown their way as the foursome talked. Then, she remembered that Tori's full name was Astoria Greengrass and her sister, Daphne, was a Slytherin in Harry's class, while Colin was so transparently a Muggleborn that he might as well have been wearing a hat with the word emblazoned on it in flashing letters. Luna, who was fairly knowledgeable about their year-mates, pointed out some of those who were glaring at them. Drusilla Crabbe was the daughter of a suspected Death Eater, while Niles Harper and Kevin Bletchley were apparently just bigoted jerks who liked to hang around with the children of suspected Death Eaters. The fourth member of that group was Marietta Edgecombe, a stuck-up social climber who Ginny had known and disliked for years. Undoubtedly, they all disapproved of Tori fraternizing with "blood traitors" and "Mudbloods." Neither Ginny nor Luna knew any of the other First Years who were all milling about anxiously while waiting to get into the boats. Ginny did notice one skinny girl with brunette hair that fell haphazardly down into her face, mainly because she made a point of standing apart from the rest as if unwilling to socialize.

Hagrid loaded the First Years into their boats and guided them to the castle where he turned them over to Professor McGonagall for the introductory speech. There was a brief bit of excitement when various ghosts wandered into the room and carried on a conversation about Peeves. Later on, she would mention that to Harry, who laughed to realize that the Hogwarts ghosts carried on the exact same conversation every year in order to spook the First Years. As the children were ushered into the Great Hall, Ginny looked around. On one side was the Gryffindor table where the Twins were waving at her excitedly, much to the embarrassment of Percy who smiled at her and then hissed at Fred and George to settle down. Interestingly, Jim and

Ron smiled at her wanly, but they both looked completely dejected about something. She was pleased to see that they'd gotten to Hogwarts in one piece, but she suspected that they were now in trouble, which, to be fair, they deserved to be. On the opposite side of the room at the far end of the Slytherin table, Ginny could barely make out Harry Potter, but he did make eye contact and nodded at her reassuringly.

The Sorting was mostly a blur. The Hat sang something about the Founders that she barely followed in her nervousness. Then, McGonagall started calling out names. Creevey went to Gryffindor, where he immediately introduced himself to a startled and annoyed Jim. Bletchley, Crabbe and Harper all went to Slytherin, as did Astoria Greengrass, seemingly to the young girl's great surprise. She made her way to the end of the Slytherin table and sat next to her sister and directly across from Harry and his two friends. Marietta Edgecome went to Ravenclaw. The big surprise, though, was Luna Lovegood being Sorted into *Gryffindor*. Apparently, she'd already made some Gryffindor friends on the train because a girl with incredibly bushy hair and a blond guy who was a bit stocky but on his way to being rather handsome stood up and clapped for her before inviting her to sit with them. Jim's reaction was less welcoming, as he literally put his head down into his hands as if the day couldn't get any worse. Finally, it was down to Ginny and the shy girl who hadn't spoken or even made eye contact with anyone thus far.

"Weasley, Ginevra!" Professor McGonagall called out. Ginny was surprised as she'd assumed that her name would put her dead last. Mustering her confidence, she walked down to the stool where the Sorting Hat rested. She had half-believed Harry when he told her about the Sorting Hat, but she'd imagined something a bit grander and not so shabby.

*"Shabby, am I?" said the Hat, causing Ginny to emit a soft "meep."*

*"Um, sorry?" Ginny thought rather than said. She was suddenly surprised to realize she was having a psychic conversation. "You're just ... not what I was expecting."*

*"Humph, you shouldn't be expecting anything at all. Who'd had thought Harry Potter of all people would be such a blabbermouth? Oh well, let's get this over with. You are a Weasley, I see. Though the first female Weasley in centuries. Ever since that unpleasantness with ... ah, forget I said anything about that. I suppose Potter's not the only blabbermouth around here."*

*"Wait, what are you ...?"*

*"No, no. Forget I mentioned it. Anyway, you are, as I said, a Weasley. So I suppose you'll be wanting to follow in your brothers' footsteps blindly without the slightest thought to your own ambitions. That seems to be the Weasley way. On the bright side, I suppose if you're in Gryffindor with your four brothers, they can look after you and protect you and keep you from any sort trouble. That's good, right?"*

*"What?!" she explained mentally. "No! I'm not blindly following anybody! I do have ambitions of my own, you know, and I certainly don't need any of them looking after me and protecting me! I can look after myself and find my own way, thank you very much!"*

*"Hmm, feisty!" exclaimed the Hat. "Lots of Gryffindor spunk, I see."*

*"Eight-year-olds have 'spunk.' I have determination."*

*"Heh-heh. I suppose you do. So I guess there's only one question left. Which is more important? That everyone around you know how brave you are? Or that you actually be brave?"*

That question surprised her and brought her up short. She thought for a few seconds. *"Be brave, always,"* she finally said and with firm conviction.

*"Humph. About bloody time one of you lot said that,"* the Hat said before finally shouting out:

***"SLYTHERIN!"***

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***2 September 1992, 7:01 a.m.***

***(The First Morning)***

Ginny rubbed her eyes. No, it had not been a dream. And someone had been speaking to her, so she should probably respond.

"Good morning, Drusilla," Ginny said somewhat guardedly. Drusilla Crabbe had been relatively pleasant to her, albeit in an unctuous manner. She even invited Ginny to use her first name, though only while in the First Year dorm room until she'd "proven herself." Drusilla's brother Vincent was one of Draco Malfoy's ... henchmen?! It still seemed absurd to Ginny that a twelve-year-old boy would have henchmen, but apparently Draco Malfoy did, and so Drusilla would have to be viewed as a ... well, a henchwoman Ginny supposed. Or perhaps henchgirl was the proper term for a First Year. So far, Drusilla hadn't tried to murder her in her sleep (though it had only been one night so far), but the Pureblood was rather insistent in calling her "Ginevra" even though she'd asked twice to be called "Ginny." On the bright

side - sort of - outside of the First Year girls' dorm room, she would be neither "*Ginevra*" nor "*Ginny*" but "*Weasley*," at least for the next month according to last night's crash course in Slytherin etiquette. She could handle that. She would always be a Weasley no matter what color necktie she wore. She just hoped that the rest of her family would feel the same. After finishing her shower, she came out in her bathrobe to find Astoria brushing her teeth.

"Good morning, Ginny!" she exclaimed cheerfully.

"Good morning, *Greengrass*," Ginny replied pointedly.

"Oh, honestly, are you seriously going to do that?"

"Hey, it was *your* sister who explained the rules. Outside of our sleeping quarters, we're not to call anyone else in Slytherin by their first names for a month unless it's a blood relative. I'm not even allowed to call Harry by his first name until October at the earliest, and he lived *at my house* last Summer."

Tori just rolled her eyes. Ginny turned and headed towards the door ... where she was met by her *other* dorm-mate, the girl whose brown hair kept falling down to cover her eyes. Ginny knew *her* name by now. She just couldn't quite bring herself to say it.

"Good ... morning," she said somewhat lamely. The other girl grunted softly and then stepped past her into the bathroom.

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***1 September 1992, 7:20 p.m.***

***(The Sorting Ceremony)***

Professor McGonagall removed the Hat, and Ginny stood up slowly and made her way over to the Slytherin table. She did not even attempt to make eye contact with any of her brothers while on the way. Harry and the shorter of his two friends stood and made room for her. As he helped her to her seat, Harry spoke softly but urgently, his tone belying the warm welcoming smile he was giving her.

"Breathe. Relax. Smile as if you're thrilled to be here and never expected to go anywhere else. That's good. Okay, actually that's a little *too* intense. Tone it down a little. You're '*thrilled to be here*,' not '*an aspiring ax murderer*.' Also, these are my friends. Theo Nott and Blaise Zabini. Across from us are Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass. I believe you know Daphne's younger sister, Astoria."

"Actually, I prefer to go by *Tori*," said the young Greengrass.

"No. You. *Don't!*" Daphne said irritably. "Astoria is the name of a daughter of an Ancient and Noble House. Tori is the name of a Muggle actress you saw once in a magazine."

"While we're on the subject of nicknames," said Tracey to Ginny, "you should totally go by Ginevra. That is a wonderful name! You should never go by a nickname if you have a name like that."

"Is that so, Theresa?" said Blaise with a mischievous smile. The girl stuck her tongue out at him in response.

"No," said Ginny firmly. "I refuse to go by Ginevra. That's where I draw the line."

"But it's a lovely name," said Daphne.

"Oh, I agree. And when I'm grown and married I plan to use it... assuming I marry someone whose surname fits well



with Ginevra. But *Ginevra Weasley* sounds like someone's elderly and slightly senile spinster aunt."

"She's got a point," said Harry. "I didn't even find out my full Wizarding Name until Summer after my first year. And if someone had told me my first day here I had to go by *Hadrian*, I'd have flung myself off the battlements. So, I guess you can go by Ginny."

"If she gets to be Ginny, I get to be Tori," said a petulant Tori Greengrass.

"Someone kill me now," muttered Daphne.

"Anyway, first names don't really matter right now. I was joking when we talked about it this morning, but now I'm quite serious. No first names until October 1st at the earliest unless someone specifically asks you to address them that way. And I *won't* be asking you to until then because it will put a target on your back that we don't want."

"You told *me* to call you Harry the first time we ate breakfast together!" exclaimed Theo irritably. "*And* you called me Theo without asking permission first!"

"Yes, well, to be honest, I was insanely reckless and aggressive this time last year because I didn't know any better. Luckily, we're both from Ancient and Noble Houses. Different rules and all that." Harry stopped suddenly. "Actually, that's a good point. There's probably a bunch of fiddling social rules for Slytherin girls that I don't know about." He turned his attention back to Daphne. "Daphne, I'm calling in my favor."

She looked at him in consternation. "The one I owe you for the New Year's Eve Ball? That's four months away! You

could be *dead* by then!"

"Yes, I know, but this is an emergency. If I don't survive to the end of the year, I'll make it up to you from beyond the grave. Anyway, I'd like for you to give Miss Weasley a crash course in Slytherin etiquette as it applies to females."

"What makes you think that female Slytherin etiquette is any different than male Slytherin etiquette?" asked Daphne, who seemed slightly affronted.

Harry looked at her as if it were a silly question. "Well, I've *met* you all, of course." She made a face at him, and so he leaned in more closely. "If you help Miss Weasley out and she excels in our House, it will make Draco Malfoy *furious*." He actually said the last word in a sing-song voice that made Tracey laugh. Daphne's eyes narrowed.

"Well, that's a valid reason, I suppose. And anyway, I have to give *Astoria* a crash course in how to behave tonight. I guess Weasley can join in."

"Why do I need a course in etiquette?" asked the younger Greengrass indignantly.

"Because our parents and I all thought you'd end up in Hufflepuff where etiquette lessons would have been wasted if not counterproductive," Daphne said. "How *did* you get Sorted into Slytherin, anyway?"

Astoria shrugged. "The Hat said that wanting to marry Cedric Diggory wasn't valid grounds for a Sorting and anyway the Slytherins desperately needed someone to cheer them up."

"I thought that's what I was for," said Harry with a smile.

"You thought wrong," said Daphne deadpanned.

"Oh, stop being so mean to Harry, Daph," said Tracey teasingly. "You're just still mad that he ruined your Grand Master Plan last year."

"Tracey, *shut up!*"

"Did I?" asked a perplexed Harry. "I don't remember that at all. What was your Grand Master Plan?"

Daphne sighed. "Honestly, it was nothing *too* grand. I was just going to lay low and let Malfoy continually make a fool of himself until Christmas Break when I'd invite everyone who he'd insulted to a Christmas Party and spend the whole night stirring up people against him. Then, I'd challenge him in the Spring sometime after I'd built a nucleus of support. You know, a *traditional* Slytherin power play. And then, you caused that insane spectacle at Halloween and ruined everything."

"What did he do?" Ginny asked.

Blaise laughed, still amused by the memory. "Oh, he just goaded Malfoy into challenging him to a duel in the middle of the Common Room and then beat him with a quick draw maneuver without firing a single spell. Malfoy nearly pissed himself on the Common Room floor while Harry just walked away whistling the tune to some old Muggle Western."

"Shhh," said Harry. "Remember. Be magnanimous in victory." Harry glanced over at Draco who was sitting some distance away next to Warrington, Pucey and the Bletchley Brothers. Unlike the mask of politeness the boy had been wearing for months, he now looked at Harry with an obvious sneer, though Harry was surprised to realize that it

was, at least in part, because Harry was being so visibly kind to a Weasley. He turned to Theo.

"Any progress on your special assignment, Agent Nott?"

"Loads. I need to research some stuff in the Library this week, but I've got some good leads."

"Agent Nott?" asked Daphne with a crooked eyebrow.

"Yeah, apparently I'm now a part of Harry's spy network, at least according to Granger. Also, something about wrist communicators which I didn't understand but which sounds *awesome!*"

"We'll put it on the to do list," said Harry with a laugh.

"Excuse me," came a bland voice from the end of the table. "Could someone pass the pumpkin juice?"

Harry and Ginny both turned and were somewhat startled to see that while they'd been talking the last of the First Years had been Sorted into Slytherin and had somehow made it to the end of the table next to their group without anyone noticing. Her plate was rather sparse, and she'd been playing with her food all this time rather than eating. She hadn't looked up as she spoke. Instead, she kept her head down, allowing her somewhat stringy brown hair to fall down into her eyes and cover part of her face.

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry," said Harry contritely. "We've all been nattering away here about my friend's unexpected Sorting, and we've been completely ignoring you. My apologies. I'm Harry Potter. And you are?"

With her right hand, the girl swept her hair back behind her ear and looked up at Harry and Ginny with a pair of

gray eyes that revealed no emotion save perhaps the faintest trace of disdain.

"Wilkes," she said flatly.

A silence descended on that part of the table as everyone in Harry's group abruptly turned to look at the girl, who was almost certainly the offspring of *that* Wilkes. If she suffered any nervousness over the attention, it didn't show.

"Amaryllis Wilkes," she continued. "Though if all the First Year girls are getting cutesy nicknames, I guess you can call me Amy."

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***2 September 1992, 7:35 a.m.***

***(The First Morning)***

As Ginny made her way down to breakfast, she thought about her House-mate, Amaryllis Wilkes, and what it meant that they'd be sharing rooms for the next seven years. During their impromptu "etiquette lesson" the night before, Daphne had explained the girl's family history. Frankly, if the Hat had mentioned that she'd be roommates with Erasmus Wilkes's daughter, she might have asked to be Sorted elsewhere. Then again, she'd answered rather emphatically that she wanted to actually "*be brave*" rather than just be thought of as brave, which she supposed was the Hat's way of warning her.

When the Toymaker was killed by the aurors in 1980, Linnea Wilkes was barely two months pregnant. It was quite possible that the Lord Wilkes himself didn't even know that he was an expectant father at the time of his death ... for which Ginny's father was awarded an Order of Merlin. Seven months later, Linnea gave birth to the child in a

Ministry holding cell, named her Amaryllis, and handed her off to Lord and Lady Goyle, who had grudgingly agreed to serve as godparents. Linnea, who was an unrepentant Death Eater, was then transferred to Azkaban where she died a week before Amy's first birthday. Amy probably had no personal memories of her parents, but Ginny shuddered to think about what she'd been *told* about the elder Wilkeses by her godparents, who were both suspected Death Eaters themselves and who were also vassals to Lucius Malfoy.

Lost in thought, Ginny was caught by surprise when, just down the corridor from the Great Hall, a hand darted out of a classroom and yanked her inside. She was just about to reach for her wand when she realized it was her brother George. He put his finger to his mouth and said "Shhh!" Then, he closed the door to the empty classroom and regarded his sister for a second before sweeping her up in a hug.

"Are you alright, Gin? Did anyone down there try to hurt you or anything? You just say the word and Fred and I will hex them into toads!"

She laughed. "No, no one's done anything so far. There's only four Slytherin girls in my year. Tori Greengrass and I are going to be great friends. Drusilla Crabbe is a stuck-up cow but hasn't said or done anything threatening yet. And Amaryllis Wilkes just keeps to herself. She's a bit creepy, but she hasn't given me any reason to think she wants revenge for her parents' deaths or anything. Besides, Melissa Bulstrode, the Seventh Year prefect, came in last night and said she wasn't going to put up with any trouble in the girls' dorm no matter whose parents killed whose. Which was kind of a disturbing way to put it, but still

somewhat reassuring. How are Ron, Fred and Percy taking things?"

He shrugged. "Mainly, they're still in shock, I guess. We ... haven't really talked about it."

She paused and studied her brother's face. "How are *you* taking it?"

George looked away for a few seconds before he spoke again, more quietly. "What did the Sorting Hat say to you?"

She hesitated. Part of her felt that her conversation with the Hat was personal. But another, bigger part of her wanted some understanding from her family. So she told him.

"*Do you want everyone to know you're brave?*" he repeated. "*Or do you want to be brave?* That's what it said?" She nodded. He seemed amazed by that, and suddenly she realized.

"It said the same thing to you, didn't it?" she asked softly.

George looked strangely embarrassed. "Yeah. It said that I had a lot of virtues that used to be Slytherin but that Slytherin House had since forgotten. And that if I were brave enough, I could go into Slytherin and maybe start the process of changing it into something more and better than what it had become." Suddenly, he seemed oddly guilty. "But ... I couldn't. See, Fred had already been Sorted into Gryffindor, like I always knew he would. And ... I just couldn't bear the thought of being separated from him, let alone Sorted into a House where we might become enemies. So when it asked me that ... I said '*I just want to be in Gryffindor.*' And so that's where it put me."

He came back over and put his hands gently on her shoulders. "I know this will be hard for you. I still don't know how Mum and Dad and the others will react. But *I* don't care what House you're in. I'll always be there for you." She smiled, and the two hugged warmly. "As for the rest, I'll talk to Fred and Percy and find out where they are. Honestly, I expect Ron will be the only one to be a pain about it, but Fred and I will set him to rights later when we have a chance to talk to him."

She smiled again. When they left for the Great Hall, Ginny's spirits were higher than they'd been since her Sorting. They remained high as she sat down at the breakfast table next to Harry and across from Daphne (or "Potter" and "Greengrass," she supposed) and didn't start to flag until she looked up and saw Errol, the Weasley family post owl, flapping through the window towards her table, a bright red envelope clutched in its talons.



# **Ginny's Day (Pt 2)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## **CHAPTER 15: Ginny's Day (Pt 2)**

***2 September 1:10 p.m.***

### ***(The First Afternoon)***

By the end of lunch, Ginny was feeling better, though what happened at breakfast still left her feeling somewhat upset. On the bright side, her first class – Transfiguration – went relatively well, though she didn't earn any points for Slytherin and McGonagall kept giving her odd looks. Harry had recommended that she put together a study group and that she not limit herself to Slytherins, so she and Luna had made plans to meet up on Friday after lunch, along with Astoria (who insisted on being called Tori whenever her sister wasn't around) and Colin. Harry had also told her that it was okay to be on a first name basis with members of other Houses and especially Gryffindors who usually avoided traditional Pureblood social conventions anyway. As she and Astoria were leaving the Great Hall, Ginny was surprised when they were intercepted by none other than Percy Weasley, who stepped in front of them both and bowed respectfully.

"Good afternoon, Miss Greengrass. I am Percival Weasley, scion of the House of Weasley. I wonder if I might borrow my sister Ginevra for a moment to discuss some family matters."

Ginny's eyes widened in surprise at Percy's unusually formal speech. She was certain he'd never called her Ginevra in her entire life. For her part, Tori just seemed amused.

"Sure thing. Ginny, I'll see you later." Then, she walked away humming a Weird Sisters tune. Ginny folded her arms and looked at her brother doubtfully.

"Ginevra?" she asked in amusement. "Are we going to be all formal now, Percival?"

The older boy blushed. "Sorry. My understanding was that Slytherins frowned on nicknames. I didn't want to embarrass you in front of one of your peers. And yet somehow, I seem to have done so anyway."

"It's alright, Percy. Astoria isn't your typical Slytherin. Although increasingly, I'm not sure what the 'typical Slytherin' actually is. So, what's up?"

He looked around. "Let's take this somewhere more private." With that, he led her to a nearby empty classroom, ironically the same one George had taken her into that morning. Once inside, he put up a privacy spell. "So, how has your first day been going? I know it must have been traumatic for you. First the Sorting last night and then the Howler this morning."

"The Howler didn't bother *me*, Percy," she interrupted.

He sighed. "I could see your face, Ginny. I think that Howler bothered you a lot more than you let on."

She shrugged. "What happened, happened. There's no sense brooding over it. In case you haven't noticed, I'm not

a brooder." She hesitated. "So, how do *you* feel about me being a Slytherin?"

"I won't deny that I worry about you. You're sharing a dorm with a whole lot of people who think you're a blood traitor, and as I understand it, you're sharing a room with at least one person who may hold a deep personal grudge against our family. That said, I trust the Sorting Hat. If it wanted you in Slytherin and you were brave enough to follow its advice, then I truly believe it will all turn out for the best, no matter what anyone else thinks."

She studied her brother for a long moment. "The Hat offered you Slytherin too, didn't it?"

He chuckled. "Actually, the Hat offered me my choice of Ravenclaw, Slytherin *and* Gryffindor in that order." Then, his expression changed to one of wistful sadness. "It also said I wasn't Hufflepuff material. At the time, I was so ignorant and arrogant that I considered that to be a compliment. Anyway, it told me that I would be happiest in Ravenclaw or most successful in Slytherin, but despite all that, I would probably insist on Gryffindor. It actually sounded annoyed with me even as it told me that. But even though it felt wrong, I couldn't bear the thought of being the first non-Gryffindor Weasley in living memory. Even at eleven, I already felt too much ..."

He stopped abruptly, looked away and started scratching at the back of his head, unwilling to finish that sentence. It didn't matter, because Ginny knew perfectly well how it would have ended: *like an outsider*.

"Percy, Mum and Dad love you. So do I. So do all your brothers, even though they're sometimes prats who don't know how to show it very well."

He smiled at her affectionately. "Oh, I know *that*, Ginny, luv. Everyone in my family loves me, and I love you and all of them. I know all that. It's just ... I've come to realize that it's possible for someone to love you but still not ... *like* you very much."

She stepped forward and hugged the older boy. "Oh Percy. I like you. Merlin knows you make it hard sometimes, but I *like* you."

He closed his eyes and hugged her back. "I like you too ... *Ginevra*." They both laughed.

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***2 September 1992, 7:45 a.m.***

***(The First Morning)***

Ginny slid into a spot at the breakfast table next to Harry who welcomed her with a cheerful "Good morning, Miss Weasley!" She rolled her eyes.

"And what a lovely morning it is, Mr. Potter. Pass the bacon please."

He complied. "So how was your first night? Did Daphne get you squared away?"

"Yes, the elder Greengrass was most informative, and neither Miss Wilkes nor Miss Crabbe attempted to murder me in my sleep."

"Good to know. And nice job there - just the right amount of sarcasm in your reply. Keep it up and you'll be calling me Harry in no time."

"You presume, Mr. Potter, that by then I'll be inclined to invite you to call me Ginny," she said in her best effort at stuck-up condescension, but he laughed nonetheless.

"Well played. Now, our next step is to maneuver you into a position of strength within your year. I'm confident you'll be able to outfly all the boys, but flying lessons won't start for a while yet, so you'll need to find a way to show off before then. Are you caught up on all your reading?"

"Yes, *mother*," she said irritably.

"Hey, I'm doing all this for your benefit, Miss Weasley, so don't get sassy with me!" Harry said in a sharp voice, though his smile made it clear he was more amused than angry. "Draco Malfoy is one of the most important opinion makers in our whole House despite his youth, and we need to get you into a position where you can stand up to him on your own merits. Incidentally, do *you* know why the Malfoys and the Weasleys hate one another?"

"Because they're disgusting bigoted ponces with ridiculous hair?" she replied in complete seriousness.

"Ooookay, looks like it affects the female Weasleys too. Good to know. But never mind that now. How's your family reacting to all this?"

"Well, I just had an ... informative talk with George, and I think we're okay. I'll try to talk with the rest of the boys later today and then send a letter to Mum and Dad this afternoon, I guess. Hopefully, they'll take it well." She looked up then and went pale. "Or maybe I'm about to find out how they took it right now."

Harry followed her gaze and saw a somewhat bedraggled owl fly flying around the Great Hall with a Howler in its

claws. He frowned – he'd expected better of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Okay, this can actually be a good thing. If you can bear up under a Howler and show it doesn't mean anything to you, you can get a lot of respect ... from ... your..."

Harry trailed off in surprise when he realized that the owl was now circling back *away* from the Slytherin table and towards the Gryffindors. The owl swooped in for a landing and dropped off the Howler right in front Ron Weasley. The boy stared at the Howler for several seconds as his House-mates urged him to open it quickly before it exploded. He looked up to stare at Ginny from all the way across the room with an expression of ... betrayal? Then, he sighed loudly and opened the Howler.

**RONALD BILIOUS WEASLEY!**

**HOW DARE YOU STEAL THAT CAR! I AM ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED! YOU'RE LUCKY YOU WEREN'T ARRESTED OR KILLED! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOUR FATHER AND I WENT THROUGH WHEN WE CAME OUT AND FOUND THE CAR MISSING?! YOU AND JIM *COULD HAVE DIED!* I JUST THANK GOODNESS THAT HARRY HAD ENOUGH SENSE TO LET SOMEONE KNOW WHAT YOU'D DONE OR ELSE YOUR FATHER MIGHT BE FACING AN INQUIRY AT WORK, AND IT WOULD BE ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT! IF YOU PUT ANOTHER TOE OUT OF LINE, WE'LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT HOME!**

**AND ANOTHER THING! DON'T YOU *DARE* SAY ONE UNKIND THING ABOUT YOUR SISTER'S SORTING! I WOULD NEVER HOLD IT AGAINST ANY OF MY CHILDREN NO MATTER WHERE THEY'RE SORTED,**

**AND I WON'T STAND FOR YOU OR ANY OF THE  
OTHER BOYS TREATING HER ANY DIFFERENTLY AS  
A RESULT!**

**YOUR FURIOUS MOTHER**

**MOLLY WEASLEY**

With that, the Howler blew a loud raspberry towards Ron before disintegrating. There was laughter from all across the Great Hall, including from the Twins until Percy angrily hissed at them to shut up. Draco and his cronies were particularly amused, though Harry did not laugh and was, in fact, quite embarrassed for the boy. His own reaction to James Potter's Howler from the year before helped make his reputation in Slytherin House, but he also had the advantage of not actually giving a damn about his father's opinion. He suspected that Ron cared much more deeply about what Molly thought of him.

To his credit, Ron didn't cry, but he did stand, pick up his bag, and calmly walk out of the Great Hall, ignoring Jim, Hermione and his three brothers as he left. At the door, however, he stopped and looked back at Ginny. Suddenly, she felt cold inside. She'd never seen Ron look at her like that before, and while she wasn't sure she could describe what she saw in his expression, it felt to her as though something important inside Ron had just died. She tried to find Ron later to talk about it, but never got to.

Not until that night.

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***2 September 1992, 5:15 p.m.***

***(Late Afternoon on the First Day)***

"*Psst! Ginny!*" Fred loudly whispered to her from down a corridor. The girl shook her head. It was amazing to think that *all* of her brothers apparently wanted to talk to her one at a time in private.

"*Thank Merlin that Bill and Charlie have already graduated,*" she thought to herself. "*Or I'd never have time to do homework!*"

Obediently, she followed the elder twin down the side corridor, but instead of the same empty classroom that George and Percy had used, he took her to a large broom closet. Once inside, he set up even more privacy charms over the door than Percy had used and turned to speak to her, but even though his mouth was open, nothing came out. Ginny was surprised. She'd never seen *either* of the Twins rendered speechless, but of the two, she'd have expected it more out of George than Fred, George being more of soft-spoken of the duo.

"Let me guess," she asked jokingly in an effort to lighten the mood, "you're going to tell me that the Hat offered you Slytherin but you insisted on Gryffindor."

Fred's face drained of all color. "How do you know about that?! Did the Hat talk about me?!"

"Fred, calm down!" she said. "It was just a joke. The Hat didn't say anything about you."

"Well what did it say about you, then? What did it tell you to get you to agree to Slytherin?" Ginny was starting to become alarmed. She'd truly never seen Fred this agitated.

"The Hat didn't really tell me anything or even give me much of a choice. It asked me some questions to get me to admit that I didn't want to just follow in the footsteps of



other people and that I didn't like feeling overprotected by my older brothers." She hesitated. "It also asked me if I wanted to actually *be* brave or just be satisfied with other people assuming I was." She winced at the look on his face. After her prior conversations with George and Percy, she was coming to realize just how troubling it was for people actually Sorted into Gryffindor to hear the Hat suggest that someone *really* brave might need to be Sorted somewhere else.

There was a long silence before Fred spoke again. "Ginny? Am I ... mean?"

She was surprised by the question, and Fred became still more upset when her surprise turned into a hesitation that lasted longer than she'd meant it to.

"I wouldn't say you're *mean*, Fred. I know that you're more aggressive in your pranking than George and that he has to hold you back sometimes. But you have a good heart and don't intentionally hurt people. Now sometimes, with some people, maybe you take it too far, perhaps? I know Ron's still upset over that whole spider thing, and I probably would be too if you'd done that to me..."

At that, Fred barked out a laugh, but there was no humor in it. Then, he rubbed his eyes.

"Fred, what's going on?" Ginny asked. "What's this all about?"

"It's been, um, suggested to me ... and to George too, I guess ... that we're a couple of ... cruel bullies. I've never thought of it that way, but now..." He looked down at the floor. "When I was Sorted, the Hat *did* want to put me in Slytherin. It said I was clever and cunning but also likeable in a way that Slytherin needed among its House-members.

But it also said that ... that *ruthlessness* was a Slytherin trait and that I had that too. And that Slytherin House would help me to harness that and use it constructively, whereas Gryffindor would just ... let it run wild."

He looked up at her nearly in tears, as unhappy as she'd ever seen on him.

"And, Ginny, I really think it has."

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***2 September 1992, 1:45 p.m.***

***(The Afternoon of the First Day)***

Ron Weasley was sitting by himself under a tree next to the Black Lake copying some passages from his Transfiguration text into his notebook when the Twins found him.

"Hello, Ickle Ronnikins!" "We'd like to have a little chat, if you have a second." "Or even if you don't." "It's about our Ickle Ginny-poo's Sorting." "And how you'd best act in response to it."

"Really?" said Ron glancing up before returning to his notes. "I was pretty sure Mum's Howler covered everything, but if you feel you need to add some more threats, have at it."

"Oooh, *have at it*, he says, Fred." "Why George! That's practically an invitation to get graphic with what we might do if our Ronnikins says or does anything to hurt Ginny's feelings!"

"Oh, I think I have a good idea of what all you can do to me. I've only lived with you my whole life." He paused and looked up again with a puzzled expression. "I

am *curious* though. If *I'd* been Sorted into Slytherin this time last year, would you two be out confronting Percy and the rest of the family and threatening them into not saying anything to hurt *my* feelings? Or would you have already flooded the Slytherin dungeons with spiders?"

"Awww! Is Ickle Ronnikins still mad over woozing his widdle teddy bear?" said Fred. For his part, though, George suddenly seemed uncomfortable.

Ron turned his attention back to his notebook and Transfiguration homework. "Yes, Fred," he spoke with a bitterness that surprised his brothers. "Yes, I am. Because I was *three*, and that bear was literally the only toy I remember having at that age, and that spider you Transfigured it into was nearly *half my size*. Though for what it's worth, I'm also still mad over that time you burned a hole in my tongue. And laughed at me while I was crying."

The Twins looked at one another, suddenly abashed. "Ron..." George began.

"I tell you what," Ron interrupted without even looking up from his writing. "Why don't we just cut to the chase? I'll swear you an Unbreakable Vow. Just like the one you nearly got me to swear when I was *five*. I'll take a vow to never say or do anything that hurts Ginny's feelings. And if I break it, I'll just *die*. Would that satisfy you two?"

"Look, Ron," George started again. "We're sorry. Both of us. We didn't mean to scare you with the spider or make fun of you or hurt you. We were just ... having a laugh."

"Guys," said Ron with surprising calm as he looked up at the Twins once more, "it's okay. Like I said, I've been dealing with this pretty much my whole life. I've gotten used to it. And honestly, it's a good thing I'm around. Because without

me, you'd have probably devoted 100% of your energy on poor old Percy." Then, he suddenly fixed Fred with an icy glare. "I imagine you'd have driven him to suicide by now."

George was dumbstruck at that, while Fred went completely pale. Neither Twin said anything in response. After a few seconds, Ron turned back to his notebook and resumed writing.

"Now, if there's nothing else, I have Transfiguration in about ten minutes, and I really need to finish copying down these notes. Unless either of you wants to, I don't know, set my robes on fire or maybe turn my Transfiguration book into a giant tarantula or something. You know – for a *laugh*."

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***2 September 1992, 10:30 p.m.***

***(The End of the First Day)***

Ginny stared at her reflection in the mirror and then bent over to splash some water on her face. When she was Sorted into Slytherin, she'd been worried about drama with her family, but she never imagined the form it would take. If anything, her Sorting seemed to have *strengthened* her bonds with three of her brothers but may have irrevocably damaged her relationship with a fourth. And worst of all, she didn't think there was anyone in her family she could talk to about it because, after the Howler, telling anyone how upset she was would probably make things worse. She was slightly horrified to realize just how much latent angst there was in the Weasley family now that her Sorting had ripped the bandages off and exposed wounds that she'd never realized existed.

As she straightened up and looked back into the mirror, she was startled to see the wan reflection of Amaryllis Wilkes standing behind her. She didn't quite scream but did let out a somewhat embarrassing squawk. The Wilkes girl merely rolled her eyes as Ginny turned around to look at her.

"Okay, Weasley. It's been just one day and I'm already tired of you jumping whenever I get near you, so let's get something straight: I'm *not* here to kill you."

"Well," swallowed Ginny, "that's ... nice."

"I'm not here to hurt you or harass you or do anything else to take revenge on you. My mother and father are dead, and *your* father is arguably responsible. But I never knew my mother and father, and from what I've learned, they were both awful, horrible people who deserved what they got. Also, the Wilkeses are a patrilineal family, and girls like me can't even become heirs. If my parents had lived, I might have been raised as a spoiled Pureblood princess until I was old enough to be married off to some Death Eater or I might have just been sacrificed as part of some disgusting blood ritual for glory of the Dark Lord. Who knows, am I right?"

Ginny nodded slowly. "Who indeed."

"So, long story short, I really don't care that you're Arthur Weasley's daughter. I mean, I *am* pretty much certain to get treated like a junior Death Eater no matter what I say or do. So if other people start picking on you for being a blood traitor or whatever, I'll probably go along with it to preserve what little social standing I have, but it won't be anything personal. Are we clear?"

"Crystal clear... Wilkes."

"Good." Amaryllis turned and headed out of the bathroom before stopping to look back at Ginny. "Unless, of course, all that stuff I just said was an elaborate bluff to lull you into a false sense of security until I take brutal revenge on you for the deaths of my parents. I mean, we *are* Slytherins, after all."

Ginny just stared at the other girl.

"That was a joke, Weasley."

"Of course it was, Wilkes. The only reason I'm not laughing is my natural Slytherin poise."

Amaryllis snorted and left the bathroom. Ginny slowly exhaled and shook her head.

*"The funny thing is," she said to herself, "after all that, I still think I have a better rapport with Erasmus Wilkes's daughter than I do with Ron!"*

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***2 September 1992, 9:40 p.m.***

***(Not Quite the End of the First Day)***

Ginny finally found Ron in the Library of all places. If she'd been asked before, she'd have guessed that he didn't even know where the Library was, but there he was at a small table in the back near the stacks where Defense books were located. He had what looked like some upper-level DADA texts open and he was copying information into his notebook.

She coughed and spoke softly. "Hello, Ron."

He looked up at her. He didn't seem angry but neither did he seem pleased to see her. "Hey. Do you want me to call you Ginny or Ginevra? I've heard different stories."

"Ginny is fine, Ron."

He started packing away his notebook and pens and clearing away his workspace. "I assume you want to talk and won't take no for an answer. It'll have to be quick, though. I need to put these books back and then get back to the Tower before curfew."

With that, he flung his book bag over his shoulder and then picked up his stack of books to return to the shelves. Ginny followed behind him.

"Ron, I'm sorry about what happened at breakfast ... with the Howler and all that."

"Did you tell Mum to send me a Howler?" he asked in apparent seriousness.

"No! Of course not!"

"Well then, I don't see what you need to feel sorry about. That was Mum's decision, not yours."

"That's not the point, Ron. I mean, she shouldn't have done that."

He shrugged. "People do what they want to do, and the people they hurt just have to deal with it. That's just how things are. I only wish I'd handled it as well as your friend Harry did when he got one last year. He just laughed and laughed. People are still talking about that. I wasn't as strong as he was, but I didn't cry or anything, so that's got to count for something, right?"

"I suppose so," she said uncertainly, having no idea where Ron was going with this.

"But anyway. You wanted to talk to me. So talk."

She hesitated and then decided to get the most provocative question out of the way. "Ron, when you were Sorted, by any chance did the Hat offer you Slytherin?"

Just for a second Ron looked offended before he got hold of himself. "No, no it didn't. It *did* offer me Hufflepuff, where I would be surrounded by people who were loyal to me and who would like me for being me and who would never take advantage of me, but at the time, I was too dumb to see the value in all that. Stupid of me, really."

"Do ... do you think I betrayed you somehow by going into Slytherin?" Ginny asked nervously.

"Well, Ginny, I'm not sure I can answer a question like that. See, as you might recall, that Howler from Mum this morning was pretty clear that I was not to say a single unkind thing about your Sorting. You wouldn't want me to get into trouble again, would you?" He finally smiled, but for some reason, Ginny wasn't reassured by it.

"Ron, right now, you can say whatever you want to say to me about my Sorting or anything else, and I promise I won't tell anyone. I just want to clear the air. I love you and I miss you. So please, tell me what you're feeling right now."

He hesitated. "You promise?"

"I give you my word, sister to brother."

For some reason, that amused Ron. "Okay, about your Sorting: At first, I was upset, but not at you. Honestly, I



blamed Harry. I thought he'd come in with his good looks and all his money and all his magical power and training and all his smart ass charm, and he'd just turned your head and that was why you went into Slytherin."

He finished replacing the Defense books and then leaned an arm on the shelf. "But then, this morning, I got that Howler from Mum, and suddenly, *I understood*. After that, it didn't matter how or why you went into Slytherin. Because I finally understood who I was and who you were and what our places were in the Weasley family."

Ginny shook her head. "Ron, you're not making any sense. What did you suddenly understand about us?"

His face became serious, more so than Ginny had ever seen it. "Do you remember your seventh birthday, Ginny? The one where Mum and Dad got you that big cake custom-decorated with magic frosting to look like Jim Potter riding around on a dragon and waving at you? The one with all those balloons and presents from each of your brothers, even though Mum and Dad bought them all and just stuck our names on them?"

She stiffened and narrowed her eyes. "I remember it. Please tell me you're not jealous that I had a bigger party than you that year, Ron."

He laughed. "Your party *every* year has been bigger than all of your brothers put together, Ginny, but that's not the point. See, what you probably *don't* remember is that your birthday that year happened to fall on *the exact same day* that the Hogwarts supply letters came. That morning, Bill got a letter from Hogwarts that had his Head Boy pin in it. And Charlie got another one letting him know that he was the Fifth Year prefect *and* the Gryffindor Quidditch

Captain. And Dad clapped them on the back and Mum kissed them on the cheek, and then both Mum and Dad went right back to getting ready for your birthday party and never mentioned it again. No big announcement to the rest of the family. No presents for them. Nothing that might distract from your big day. I only know about it because I happened to be there to see it, but being just an eight-year-old, I didn't understand what I'd seen at the time. Not until today when I got that Howler. But looking back on it, I think – in fact, I'd bet my last galleon – that your seventh birthday was the *exact day* that Bill and Charlie both decided to change their career plans. Before that, Bill was talking about getting a Ministry job and Charlie wanted to play professional Quidditch here in Britain. Instead, they both got jobs that required them to move over 2,000 miles away. Funny that, don't you think?"

Ginny stared at her brother uncomfortably. Looking back, she realized the timing was right for what he said, but she certainly didn't remember either Mum or Dad making a fuss over Bill and Charlie's extraordinary news. Surely they didn't snub their two oldest boys just for her seventh birthday party, did they? More importantly, surely that snub didn't incense Bill and Charlie so much that they decided to leave the country to get away from their family!

"Anyway, forget about your seventh birthday. Here's a more obscure birthday for you. After I lost my appetite at breakfast this morning, I suddenly took an interest in genealogy and spent some time here in the Library researching. *9 September 1769*. You know what that date is?" She shook her head in confusion. "That was the birth date of Ludmilla Weasley, the last daughter born to the Weasley line ... until you. Over *200 years* without any girls born into the family ... until you. But as I was looking that up, I noticed something else that was interesting. In all that

time, no generation of Weasleys before ours has ever had more than four children and most only had one or two, but Mum and Dad had *seven*. Ha! *Seven children* on a Ministry bureaucrat's salary! Now, the way I see it, either seven is the number that breaks whatever curse we're under and allows for a daughter – seven being the most powerful magic number and all that guff – or else Mum and Dad just kept trying until they got the daughter they wanted, in which case we're lucky you finally came in at number seven or they'd have had to start dropping the spare boys off at the nearest orphanage."

"Stop it, Ron!" exclaimed Ginny who was becoming angry.

"Hey now! There's no reason for *you* to be the one getting angry. I mean, you're the winner here, not me." He smirked. "Bill was the perfect son. Charlie was almost the perfect son. Percy's a little bit prickly, but he still got twelve OWLS. The Twins are smart even if they don't apply themselves, and besides, everyone *loooves* them because *they're just so damned CLEVER and FUNNY!*" As Ron described the Twins, his smirk turned into a sneer as his voice grew louder and harsher. A fleck of spittle shot out of his mouth, and Ginny instinctively took a step back. Suddenly, she was no longer angry but frightened, both of her brother and for him. Ron paused to take a deep breath and then slowly exhale. Then, he spoke calmly but no less bitterly.

"But me? I've got next to nothing. I'm pretty good at chess. I suppose I'd do great at a pie-eating contest or something like that. Oh, and I'm best friends with the Boy-Who-Lived. I do have *that* going for me. So yeah, when Jim said we were in danger at Kings Cross and asked if *I* had any ideas for getting away and escaping to Hogwarts, I suggested the Anglia. Now maybe that was a good idea, or maybe it wasn't. But the fact remains – I was the one who tried to

help protect the Boy-Who-Lived while you were the one who joined the House of Death Eaters. And yet somehow, *I'm* the one who got a Howler in front of the whole school. And that's when I realized. There is *nothing* that *you* could do that would cause you to lose our parents' affection. And there is *nothing* that *I* can do to win their respect, because coming in at Son #6, I'm nothing but one of the *spare*s they had to pop out on the road to *you*. I mean, Head Boy, Quidditch Captain and 12 OWLS wasn't enough, so what chance do I have?"

Ron picked up his book bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Congratulations on your Sorting, Ginny," he said as he passed by her on his way out. "I'm sure you'll do our parents proud. Daddy's Little Death Eater and all that."

With that last remark, Ron left Ginny behind. As she walked back to the dungeons alone, the girl briefly wondered whether her now being a Slytherin was the reason she wasn't crying.

## Chapter End Notes

AN: Re Molly's Howler. Admittedly, Molly's use of a Howler on Ron in canon doesn't reflect well on her. However, there are two things to remember about it. One, Howler's are apparently commonplace in the wizarding world. As embarrassing as Ron's Howler was, no one in canon thought it was even slightly unusual for Ron to get one after what he'd done. Even Neville stated that Augusta had sent him one in the past, presumably for less egregious offenses than grand theft auto. This appears in canon to be just one of the quirky things about the wizarding world that differentiates it from the Muggle world.

Second, people tend to forget this, but Molly was completely justified in being furious with Ron! Imagine that you had a twelve-year-old son who missed the bus on the first day of school ... and his response was to steal the family car and try to drive himself to school! Imagine further that he took with him as a passenger the most famous and well-known twelve-year-old in the world (Malia Obama, perhaps, or Prince William when he was that age). Imagine that he totaled it upon arriving at school! Imagine that the car had been tricked out with modifications that weren't street legal by your spouse ... who holds a position equivalent to Chairman of the National Automotive Safety Administration and who would become mired in scandal if the government found out all the details about the car's modifications. Honestly, in my head-canon for that scene, Molly was really angry first about how Ron had done something reckless and dangerous and second about the Inquiry at the Ministry, because due to Ron's thoughtless actions, Arthur was genuinely in danger of losing his job or possibly being sent to Azkaban for violating the very laws that he was supposed to be enforcing.

That doesn't mean that Molly's Howler isn't a bad thing - parents should try to avoid humiliating their children in public no matter how foolishly the child acted. But the canon, IMO, does not support the idea that Molly sends out hysterical Howlers every time she gets mad over some little thing. And it certainly doesn't support the (again IMO) bizarre reading of the character that treats Molly as some sort of hideous she-beast who spends all her time shrieking and ranting and more often than not who's been plotting since her first appearance to marry Ginny off to Harry so she can steal his fortune. I see that all the time in fan fiction, and to

me it makes about as much sense as Argus Filch secretly being the Dark Lord.

# Lockhart's Little Quiz

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 16: Lockhart's Little Quiz

***3 September 1992***

Just after lunch on Wednesday, a reluctant Harry accompanied a nervous Marcus Flint to meet with Professor Snape to discuss whether the man would allow Marcus to enter his Sixth Year NEWTS Potions class.

"I still don't know why you need me, Marcus," said Harry. "You're the Seventh Year Slytherin prefect. You already have Snape's support. A lowly Second Year like me isn't going to change his mind."

"Bollocks, Harry. I'm the Seventh Year prefect because every other male Slytherin in my class has been an even bigger wanker than me for the last six years. Besides, he loves you." Flint paused. "Well, he doesn't *hate* you as much as he does most people. If nothing else, maybe you'll bring good luck like you did at the birthday party."

Harry looked up at him in astonishment. "How did I bring you good luck?! You almost got *eaten* by a children's toy!"

"Ah, but I didn't. Instead, I helped save Rufus Scrimgeour's life *and* got your Dad to shake my hand even though he'd spent the whole afternoon looking at me like I was something a sick dog had left on his yard. I call that good luck!"

Minutes later, Harry was seriously questioning whether he was lucky at all given the look that Snape was giving them both as Flint stammered out his request to be allowed into Sixth Year Potions despite (a) being a Seventh Year and (b) only scoring an EE on the Potions OWL exam he retook the previous summer. Snape said nothing at first, and the silence grew so oppressive that Harry thought he could hear Marcus's pounding heart. Finally, the man spoke.

"Mr. Flint, do you wish to pursue a Mastery in Potions?"

"Um, no sir."

"Do you wish to work in the experimental potions department at St. Mungo's?"

"No, sir," said Flint who was growing confused.

"Is it your goal to become an Unspeakable?"

"Sir, I just want to be eligible for the Auror Academy."

"I see. Then, your request is *denied*."

Flint looked stricken at that, while Harry finally spoke out. "Professor, I know you have a strict policy, but Mr. Flint jumped from a Poor to an Exceeds Expectations purely through just a few months of self-study. Surely that shows the depth of his commitment."

"I am not interested in commitment out of my Sixth and Seventh Year Potions students, Mr. Potter. I am interested in academic brilliance. Mr. Flint will not be permitted to enter my NEWTS Potion class... because doing so is *completely unnecessary* for his stated career goals."

"Sir?" asked Harry.



"Honestly, Potter," Snape drawled, "use that brain that you somehow acquired despite sharing genetic material with your father and brother! Since I instituted a policy of only allowing Outstanding students to proceed past Fifth Year in my class, I have never had more than eight students in a given year graduate having completed the two-year NEWTs Potion curriculum. And yet, *somehow*, fifteen to twenty Hogwarts graduates pass the NEWT Potions exam *every year*. Now how would you explain this discrepancy?"

Harry blinked. "I would guess ... that the last two years of the Potions class aren't actually necessary to pass the NEWT exam?" he said uncertainly.

"Of course not!" the Professor snapped. "Do you really think the Headmaster – to say nothing of the Ministry – would tolerate a policy put in place by *me* that significantly reduced the number of applicants eligible to enter the Auror Academy or to apprentice at St. Mungo's? Especially if that policy blatantly favored Slytherins?"

Harry blinked some more. Now that the man had mentioned it, it was rather surprising that his selectivity had been permitted by the Powers That Be for the better part of ten years.

Snape's mouth wrinkled under his nose in an expression of disdain. "Few things in this world annoy me as much as dunderheads who uncritically compare the most subtle science of potion-making ... to *cooking*. Unfortunately, the reason that comparison annoys me so much is because it is substantially correct. The essence of potion-making involves understanding what ingredients to use; how to properly chop, dice, crush or otherwise prepare the ingredients before adding them to the cauldron; and how long to let them brew and at what temperature. If you understand the

fundamental techniques and can follow directions and *above-all* have sufficient patience and attention to detail, you can brew nearly any potion simply by following the directions, just as a reasonably intelligent Muggle can follow the recipes in a cookbook to prepare any dish. *But*, just because any imbecile can cook a grilled cheese sandwich doesn't mean he can just as easily prepare a Beef Wellington."

"Beef who?" asked a confused Marcus.

"Beef Wellington," said Harry. "It's a filet steak coated with pâté de foie gras and duxelles and then baked," at that point the boy noticed Snape staring at him with a slightly feral look, "inside a puff pastry and I'll shut up now."

"Please do," said the Potions Master. "My point, Mr. Flint, is that there are no new techniques that are tested on the Potions NEWT that will be introduced in Years Six and Seven, which focus instead on advanced techniques offered as preparation for a future Potions apprenticeship. You already know every technical skill you need to pass the exam right now. The only difference between the OWL and NEWT exams lies in the increased number of potions you are expected to either brew from memory or via written instructions. That is why my practice from Day One is to write the brewing instructions on the blackboard and give little further direct instruction to the entire class - because that is how the OWL and NEWT practical exams are given. And while my students may whine endlessly about my teaching techniques, they have borne fruit in the form of a fifteen percent increase in the number of Hogwarts students who pass the Potions OWL compared to my predecessor, as well as a twenty percent increase in the number of students who eventually complete a Mastery."

He stood and opened the door for the two Slytherins, making it plain that it was time for them to depart. "In short, Mr. Flint, I recommend you hire a tutor and engage in vigorous self-study for the next nine months. That would be far more beneficial than sitting through a year of highly theoretical and advanced potions material which will not even appear on your NEWT exam. Now, if that is all, gentlemen, I bid you good day. I have the Gryffindor First Years in fifteen minutes, and I must prepare myself for the crushing wave of idiocy that draws nigh."

Once outside, Marcus looked at Harry in frustration. "Well, that was just spiffing! So I just find a potions tutor, which will probably be as embarrassing as it is expensive."

"Oi!" said Harry in annoyance. "I got tutored three days a week last summer and was glad of it. You do what you have to do to win. And besides, it's a *good* thing that you don't actually need two years of NEWTS potions to take the exam. McGonagall has already said she'll let you into her Sixth form class this year, and this means you'll only need to take the Seventh year Transfiguration class when you come back next year. In the meantime, I'll figure something out on a Potions tutor."

Marcus nodded, relaxing a bit. "Thanks Harry."

Harry looked down at his watch. "And if you'll excuse me, I have to go see what the Great and Magnificent Gilderoy Lockhart has in store for us on the first day of class. Probably something to do with exfoliation."

Flint laughed. "Yeah, good luck with that. And don't forget – Quidditch tryouts tomorrow at 3:00."

Harry nodded and headed off to his next class: DADA with the Slytherins and the Gryffindors. Add Gilderoy Lockhart

to the mix, and Harry was sure it was going to be a disaster.

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Fifteen minutes later, Harry was seated in the DADA classroom, which had three new additions that caught Harry's eye. One was an enormous moving portrait of Gilderoy Lockhart ... painting a smaller moving portrait of Gilderoy Lockhart. It looked like the two Lockharts were constantly complimenting each other on their appearance when not looking out towards the classroom with dazzling smiles. Another was a small cage-shaped object on the desk which was covered by a purple cloth. Occasionally, it shook violently, suggesting that some Dark creature was trapped inside. Oh, and the chandelier had been decorated ... with dainty white flower blossoms that somehow didn't wither away from the glare of contempt Harry gave them.

The Slytherins for the most part stuck to the left side of the room and the Gryffindors to the right. Harry sat close to the middle, with Theo and Blaise on one side and Neville and Hermione on the other. Most of the other Second Year girls sat on the front row giggling with excitement, while Jim and Ron and the other Gryffindor boys were on the back row. Suddenly, the door in the back of the classroom was flung open, and Professor Lockhart strode through, resplendent in ultra-fashionable robes of tan and beige, his wand already in his hand. The class grew silent as he imperiously addressed the room.

"Let me introduce you to your new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor ... *me*. Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin (Third Class), Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of the *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile Award. *But*, I don't like to talk about all *that*. After all, I didn't defeat the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her, *ha-Ha!*" Harry and Neville

glanced over at each other. That *laugh* was going to get old very quickly.

"Now then, before we begin the lesson proper, we shall begin the class with a little quiz." The class groaned. "Now, now, it is important for me to properly evaluate where you all are and what you already know, as well as what, if any, particular interests you have within the broader canvas of the noble field of ... *Defense Against the Dark Arts!*"

Lockhart gestured with both hands as he intoned the class's name, as if he could envision it written in giant glowing letters with his name across the top. "Hence, my little quiz. Now, I'm sure you all want to do your best, but I do have some additional incentives for you all. First, the five highest scoring students within each year will win one point each for their respective Houses. Second, if House pride does not encourage you, I will add an additional lagniappe."

"What's a lagniappe?" whispered Neville.

"I think it's a pastry," muttered Harry before Hermione shushed them both.

Lockhart continued. "Each student who scores high enough on the test and exhibits a particular expertise in the subject matter of one or more questions will be offered the chance to participate in one of several multi-year research groups. You will have a chance to work together with the brightest young minds among the upperclassmen of each house and, before the end of the year, will present a research paper germane to whatever research area you pursue. This paper, along with attendance and participation in the group meetings, will constitute 40% of your final grade, with the remaining 60% coming from the final exam."

At that, Harry and Hermione looked at each other sharply. *Forty percent of the final grade coming from a research paper?*

"*But* for those of you who do not score well enough on the test to participate in these research projects, *do not despair!* For instead of a research paper, 40% of *your* grades will come from elsewhere. You see, I have long believed that magical skill is not enough to defend one's self against that which crawls out of the dark places to threaten us. No, no, my young students! One must also be physically fit and martially proficient. Thus, those who do not score high enough on the quiz to be placed in a research group will instead undertake a course in physical fitness, conditioning and self-defense which I will teach each day Monday through Friday starting at 7:00 a.m. This course will be mandatory for all those not assigned to one of the research groups, with attendance and participation in it again making up 40% of your final grade for the year. Any questions?"

There were none, because the entire class was staring at Lockhart with their mouths agape in complete horror. *Physical fitness?! Self-Defense?! Starting at dawn for five days a week?! And it's 40% of the final grade?!*

"No questions! Excellent! I'm delighted to see how attentive you all are. Now, you have one hour to complete the quiz. Good luck to you all!" And with that, he gestured with his wand towards a thick stack of papers on his desk which promptly flew up and distributed themselves throughout the class. Harry grabbed his eagerly, scanned the first two questions, and nearly shouted out a profanity.

## **1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday?**

## **2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?**

Harry's head jerked up and he stared at the professor in a fury, but the man was paying the class no mind. Instead, he was sitting in a chair behind his desk with his feet propped up while he read from *his own autobiography* that was levitating in the air above him! With an audible growl, Harry returned to the exam, and he was relieved to see that, after the first few personal questions about the pompous instructor, the exam turned to more legitimate DADA topics.

**7. Give a brief physical description of each of the following creatures as well as one viable approach for dealing with them in the wild: grindylows, hinkypucks, doxies, runespoors, bowtruckles, and gnomes.**

**8. Name the most effective spell you can think of to defend against each of the following: vampires, hags, Dementors, werewolves, boggarts, and lethifolds.**

**9. List the three chief weaknesses of the Protego shield.**

**10. Describe the purpose and function of a Rememberall.**

**11. What possible advantages do conventional non-magical hand-to-hand combat techniques hold over wand magic when engaged in a fight with a dark wizard? For bonus points: Do you have any formal training in any form of martial arts? If so, tell me what form you have studied and what degree of training you have reached.**

As the exam progressed, however, the questions became much more ... unusual. Some seemed incredibly arcane for a Second Year class. Others seemed so philosophical and subjective that Harry had no idea what might be considered a "correct" answer.

**16. Explain your understanding of the term "dark magic."**

**17. Is there such a thing as "light magic"? Or "grey magic"? If you say yes for either or both, explain your understanding of what those terms mean.**

**18. What is an "esoteric" spell, and how is it distinct from most of the "standard" spells you have studied so far in your education?**

**25. Close your eyes and think about your happiest memory. Describe how it makes you feel. You may include personal information about your chosen memory for context if you wish, but it is not required if the memory is too personal to share.**

**33. Do you play Quidditch? If so, what position do you favor and how skilled do you consider yourself to be at it?**

**34. Are you familiar with the Muggle sport known as ping-pong? If so, how proficient are you at it?**

Around that point, Harry and Neville were both startled to hear Hermione utter a very soft expletive. Astonished that anything in Lockhart's exam could so shock his demure friend, Harry looked ahead to the next page and immediately realized what had triggered her reaction. He was just as shocked himself.



**45. Tell me everything you know that is relevant to the subjects of "nargles" and "wrackspurts," and please cite the source of your knowledge. You may use additional parchment if necessary.**

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"TIMES UP!" Lockhart abruptly bellowed to the startled class. "You have five seconds to put your name on the top of the quiz if you have not already done so. Then, they will be collected and your grades and assignments posted by the end of the week." Seconds later, the exams were snatched away from the students with a wave of Lockhart's wand to be deposited on his desk.

"Now then, for the remaining half hour, it's time for some practical work. I wouldn't want you all to worry that I was just a harmless bookworm instead of a man of action, *ha-Ha!*" He stepped around the desk to the covered cage which had been rattling intermittently throughout the previous hour. "Now, I warn you. During the rest of the school year, you may find yourself facing your *worst nightmares* within this room. Know, however, that you are *safe*. For I, Gilderoy Lockhart, stand ready to protect you." He reached for the cloth and then paused to turn back to the nervous students. "Please, *try* not to scream. It might *PROVOKE THEM!*"

With that, he ripped off the cloth with a flourish to reveal a brass cage containing what looked to be about a dozen or so tiny blue-skinned humanoid figures with big eyes and buzzing wings. It was decidedly anticlimactic.

"Cornish Pixies!" scoffed Seamus Finnegan. In the back corners, Jim and Ron on one side and Draco and his lackeys on the other all began to laugh in relief. Lockhart looked oddly smug.

"Oh dear. And I'd so hoped to impress you all on your first day with a potentially dangerous creature. But apparently, the lowly Cornish Pixie is beneath the concern of such accomplished young wizards and witches as yourselves. I humbly apologize for underestimating your acumen."

At the end of his apology, Lockhart threw out his arms in what seemed meant as a conciliatory gesture, but in the process, he accidentally bumped the cage, causing it to fall to the floor with a crash and an embarrassed "Oops!" from the Professor. The lid popped open, and the pixies flew out chittering loudly as they did.

"Oh goodness me! How clumsy that was! Well, good thing they're just pixies. No trouble at all for you to round up, I'm sure."

Harry had to suppress a shudder – the sound they made reminded him uncomfortably of the doxy swarm, although he knew that Cornish pixies were less dangerous than doxies and there were far fewer such creatures in the room today. Nevertheless, there was instant pandemonium in the class room.

"Ahh! Not the hair, not the hair!" screamed Lavender as one of the creatures grabbed hold of her locks and pulled.

"OWWW!" yelled Draco after Goyle, who'd been aiming to pound a pixie with a heavy book, missed and struck him in the back of the head.

"Dammit!" exclaimed Neville as he attempted to pop his wand out of its new holster only for it to fly out of his hand and land on the floor.

"**PROTEGO!**" cried Harry, the only one who'd managed to get a spell off in the initial fracas. A brilliant shimmering

shield sprang into existence surrounding him, Neville, Hermione, Blaise and Theo. Seconds later, he heard Jim's voice behind him casting the same shield. Unfortunately, he realized almost instantly what a poor fit the Protego was for this situation. It was an enormous power hog for someone as young as him even under ideal situations, but more importantly, it was designed to block powerful spells and attacks at a single point of impact, not to protect five people from a flock of small magical creatures attacking at multiple points. After just a few seconds, Harry's knees started to wobble and his eyes swim. Then, his shield collapsed followed by the boy himself.

"Harry!" yelled Neville as he tried to catch the staggering Slytherin, but then Longbottom let out a cry of panic himself as two pixies flew in, grabbed him by the ears and started carrying him up into the air towards the hanging chandelier.

"**IMMOBULUS!**" cast Hermione in the direction of two pixies flying straight towards her. There was a flash of light and the creatures were suddenly frozen in mid-air. Harry immediately called out to Neville and targeted a Stunner towards the pixie attached to the boy's left ear. But before it could impact, his Stunner was deflected away by some unknown spell cast by Professor Lockhart. Harry angrily turned towards the fop but was surprised to see that the man was rather sternly wagging the index finger of his left hand in a warning manner. Then, another pixie swooped in and attempted to grab Lockhart's wand. Instead, however, Lockhart's whole body lit up in a soft blue nimbus, and the pixie jerked as if being electrocuted before letting go and fluttering away limply.

"Somebody get me DOWN!" yelled Neville, who was now suspended from the chandelier by the back of his robe.

Lockhart sighed. "Yes, I do suppose that's enough chaos for one morning." Then, he took a deep breath and waved his wand in a wide arc over the top of the class room.

"**IMMOBULUS MAXIMUS!**" he bellowed. There was a much brighter flash of light than the spell cast by Hermione, and suddenly all the pixies across the room were frozen in mid-air, blinking in confusion. Lockhart turned to pick up the cage that he'd knocked over, apparently deliberately.

"Three points to Gryffindor for Miss Granger actually doing something remotely constructive. Though you'd have gotten a full five if you'd thought to use the Maximus modifier with your Immobulus and taken out the entire swarm. **WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!**" With that spell, he gently lifted Neville off the chandelier from which he had been hanging and down to the ground.

"Why is it always me?" Neville muttered in annoyance, but Lockhart heard him.

"Why indeed? Does anyone have any theories as to why Mr. Longbottom was targeted in particular? Anyone at all?"

The room was silent for a second, and once it was clear the Professor really was waiting for a volunteer, Daphne Greengrass raised her hand confidently, and Lockhart called on her.

"Longbottom is the largest person in the middle of the room. Pixies generally target mid-sized animals like sheep or small cows and leave them hanging from blackthorn trees," she suddenly looked a bit green, "um, so that their blood can be drained out. Anyway, I just noticed that you'd hung blackthorn branches and blossoms in the chandelier, presumably to imitate their native habitats."

"Well stated and very observant of you, Miss Greengrass. Two points to Slytherin. As '*harmless*' as Cornish pixies may appear to be to the uninitiated, they *are* carnivorous swarming predators. While not as dangerous as their cousins, the doxies, these pixies do carry a paralytic venom, and had Mr. Longbottom been caught in the wild, he'd have been bound up in a tree and slowly exsanguinated."

Lockhart suddenly smiled at what he'd just said.

"Exsanguinated! What a delightful word for something so macabre! Makes me feel quite professional to say it! *Ex-SANG-guinated!* Anyway, Mr. Longbottom, you will be pleased to know that these pixies have been defanged, declawed and de-venomed for academic use. I promise you, I would never allow one of my students to be disemboweled and *exsanguinated* the first day. That would be *terrible* for my future book sales, *ha-Ha!*"

Neville, for some reason, didn't find that very funny.

"Cornish pixies also have an unusual hunting technique. When a pair of pixies each grab an ear on a prey animal, it has the curious magical effect of making the prey weightless, which is how Mr. Longbottom could be lifted up to the ceiling by two creatures who weigh less than a pound each without having his ears ripped off instead. Now, armed with that new information, Mr. Harry Potter, do you now understand why I interfered with your noble but misguided effort to rescue Mr. Longbottom?"

Harry, who had retaken his seat, thought for a second, and then the light bulb went off in his head. He suddenly blushed in embarrassment. "If I'd taken out only one of the pixies, the magical weightlessness effect would have failed and Nev ... er, Mr. Longbottom would have fallen and been hurt." He turned to his friend and whispered, "Sorry, mate."

"No harm, no foul, Harry," he whispered back.

"For future reference, Mr. Longbottom, should you find yourself in that situation again, the proper response is to grab each pixie around the stomach and gently squeeze until the creatures begin to lose consciousness, at which point they will gently float you to the ground. Of course, once you're back on the ground, you must immediately seek medical assistance, as the paralytic venom of wild pixies will render you completely helpless within fifteen minutes. If you have reason to believe that you're entering an area where wild Cornish pixies may be found, it would be wise to carry a vial of Mandrake extract with you, as it will counteract the paralysis if ingested quickly and render you immune to the venom for several hours." He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small vial containing a glowing green liquid. "The Muggles have a saying: Proper planning prevents poor performance," he said before replacing the vial and continuing with his lecture.

"Now, Miss Granger answered the question of how best to attack the creatures, though her particular method was sub-optimal. But I am dismayed that no one at all considered suitable defensive options. The two Mr. Potters and, belatedly, Mr. Malfoy tried to defend themselves with Protego shields – nicely executed all three of you, at least for wizards of your age and experience – but the deficiencies of Protego must have quickly become apparent when used against swarming creatures. What makes this particularly disappointing to me is that the correct answer should have been obvious to anyone who read my opus **Holidays with Hags** in which I defended myself against a swarm of grindylows with the Vestamentarum shield. As the spell's description makes clear, it's a low-level full-body shield with minimal power requirements, but it is particularly useful against smaller swarming creatures of

any kind, whether magical creatures like grindylows or pixies or mundane dangers such as bee swarms or piranha schools. It will not protect against any animals much larger than those nor will it block any actual spells, but Vestamentarum's power requirements are comparatively negligible. I've actually had one on since before I entered the room."

With that, he clapped his hands together hard, and the blue nimbus Harry had noticed earlier lit up again, causing a small spark of electricity to envelop both his hands. Apparently, it was mildly painful as he grimaced and shook his hands out.

"*Ouch*. Now, I'll just put our little floating friends away, and we'll spend the remainder of the class practicing the Vestamentarum shield." With that, he pulled his wand back out and touched it to the empty cage now back on his desk. "Peskipiksi Pesternomi." There was a flurry of motion as all the pixies were sucked back into the cage.

"Was that a spell, Professor?" asked Granger in surprise.

"No, Miss Granger, just a command word to activate the enchantment on the cage that automatically summons the pixies back inside." He chuckled. "We British do love our bad puns, don't we."

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Later, as the class was leaving, Blaise leaned in to Harry with a smirk. "Well?"

"Alright, you win. There's more to Lockhart than meets the eye. He's not just a pompous fraud."

But then Blaise's smirk faded as Harry looked him in the eye with a serious expression. "So you tell me: why is

he *pretending* to be a pompous fraud?"

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Lockhart's self-introduction and his dialogue introducing the pixies is taken from the movie [Chamber of Secrets.]



# **Team-Building Exercises (1)**

## **CHAPTER 17: Team-Building Exercises (Pt. 1)**

***4 September 1992***

By 3:00 p.m. on Friday, Harry was out on the Quidditch pitch ready for tryouts. In his hand was a Nimbus 2000, exactly like the one Jim had received the year before. James and Lily had bought it as his birthday present but had not been able to see him open it before the party turned into a bloodbath, so they had it delivered to Longbottom Manor the next day with a note of apology. Harry had managed to squeeze in as much flying practice as possible before the end of summer, but he didn't really have anyone to actually practice Quidditch with, so he was hoping "Potter talent" would be enough. James had been a legendary Chaser, so hopefully he'd have inherited that (and as little else as possible).

The Slytherin returning team members were Marcus Flint and Adrian Pucey as Chasers, Peregrine Derrick and Lucian Bole as Beaters, and Miles Bletchley as Keeper. Graham Montague, the other Chaser from the year before, was a returning Third Year, but he'd quietly let Marcus know over the Summer that he'd only play again if no one who tried out was any good. The boy was feeling the pressure to follow in his brother Rodney's footsteps (the former prefect had graduated with six NEWTs and was off to Italy for a Double Mastery in Potions and Transfiguration), and he felt that he needed to get his grades up rather than spend twelve or more hours a week on Quidditch. Marcus, who was likewise feeling the pressure of his own upcoming NEWTs, was in no position to complain. Consequently, there were two open spots on the Slytherin team: Chaser and

Seeker. Harry and Draco were trying out for both spots, as was Cassius Warrington, a Fourth Year. Unlike the Malfoys, the Warringtons were never accused of being actual Death Eaters, but like the Bletchleys and Harpers, they definitely had Pureblood sympathies. A few other Snakes would be trying out, but those three were clearly the ones to beat.

As Marcus explained how the tryouts for the open positions would work, Harry noticed that Bletchley was giving him an ugly look. Finally, at the end of his speech, Marcus asked if there were any questions, and he was surprised when his veteran Third Year Keeper raised his hand.

"Yeah, Bletchley?"

"When you're picking the newbies, will you take things like House loyalty into account?"

Marcus gave him an angry glare. "What the hell is that supposed to mean, Bletchley?"

"It means, *Captain*, that I don't know if I'm happy being on a team with someone who thinks I'm '*a bigoted lackey of a failed Dark Lord*,'" replied the Pureblood as he glanced over at Harry. Both Draco and Warrington grumbled, as did a few of the older students.

Harry yawned in apparent boredom. "If you're referring to me with that crack, Bletchley, then I must say I'm surprised. I wasn't aware that your family had ever even followed Voldemort." Everyone flinched at the name and the group went quiet.

"You shouldn't say that name, Potter," said Warrington in a dangerous voice.

Harry looked back at him levelly. "Why not, Warrington? I'm not afraid of dead men. And anyway, I can't imagine why saying that name should offend anyone here. After all," he spared a glance towards Draco, "it's not as though any of our parents *willingly* served the man, right?"

Draco scowled. He'd been raised to believe in the Dark Lord's Pureblood philosophy ... as well as to believe that one day the Dark Lord would return. However, he also knew that *denying* such beliefs was the only thing that had kept his father out of Azkaban, a fact that left him unable to respond to Harry's comments.

"Enough," said Marcus. "I don't give a damn about what anyone's parents did, whether twelve years ago or earlier this morning. I want the best damned team I can get because I want to go out with another Quidditch Cup under my belt. If you want to refight the last war, do it somewhere else! Got it!"

Everyone grumbled an agreement, and at his command, they took to the air for the tryouts. By the end of the first hour, it was clear to everyone that, blood traitor or no, Harry Potter was an exceptionally talented Quidditch player. By the end of the second hour, both Draco and Warrington were visibly frustrated as it seemed almost certain that Harry would make the team, and it was now a contest between the two of them for whichever spot Harry didn't want. Of the two, Draco was a much better Seeker, but Warrington edged him slightly as a Chaser. At the end of tryouts, Marcus pulled Harry aside.

"Alright, Potter. Time for you to decide. You've got your pick of Seeker or Chaser."

Harry nodded. Humility was not a prized attribute among Slytherins, and he didn't waste Flint's time by pretending that he wasn't the best candidate for either of the two slots. "Who do you see taking the other slot?"

Flint exhaled. "Malfoy's a better Seeker than Warrington is a Chaser. Gotta say, though, I'm a bit worried about the possible complications of Malfoy on the team."

"How so?" asked Harry.

The other boy looked around to make certain they were not being observed. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone until after I've announced the new team members, but Lucius Malfoy donated a set of new brooms to the team. Nimbus 2001s."

Harry whistled. "Conditional on his son making the team?"

"That's just it. He made it *very* clear that it was *not* conditional on Draco making the team. He said he'd be pleased if Draco made it on, but only if I was 100% sure he was the absolute best person for the spot. In fact, he said he'd rather Draco *not* make the team at all rather than make it and embarrass the family by not being qualified and getting on just because of his name. It was like ... like if I didn't think Draco was essential to the team, then he was actually bribing me to keep Draco off!" Marcus thought for a minute. "Oh, and he also said not to *tell* anybody any of that, so don't go blabbing."

Harry brow furrowed at the new information, and he turned to look at Draco who was standing across the field with Warrington and Bletchley. "*And even if Draco does make it on through merit, everyone else will just assume it was due to his father's gift,*" he thought to himself. "*What is Lucius Malfoy's game?*"

"So anyway, it all comes down to you, Potter. What position do you want?"

Harry turned back to Flint with a thoughtful expression on his face.

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## ***5 September 1992***

Bright and early on Saturday morning, the Slytherin team was en route to the pitch when they crossed paths with the Gryffindors who were doing the same. Immediately, the Lions' high-strung captain, Oliver Wood, threw a tantrum.

"But, I *booked the pitch!* I *BOOKED IT!*" he said with steam practically coming out of his ears. Naturally, Marcus knew perfectly well that Oliver had booked the pitch with Madame Hooch for this morning. That was why he went behind her back to Snape for a note that gave him priority.

"Sorry, Wood. We need the practice time. We've got a new Seeker, a new Chaser *and* ... a set of seven shiny new Nimbus 2001s to break in." The Gryffindors instantly started grumbling at that news, particularly Jim.

"Yeah, well, at least no one on our team had to buy their way on," he said contemptuously.

"Says the only Gryffindor whose father bought him a Nimbus 2000 last year," replied Harry with a laugh. "Why don't you just get Daddy to buy a set of Nimbuses for the whole Gryffindor team if you have such ... *broom envy*." The other Slytherins snickered rudely at that.

"That's disgusting," said Jim. "And typical. There's never been a Slytherin with any class and there never will be."

Harry laughed at his twin. Behind Jim, Harry noticed that both George and Fred both frowned at his brother's blanket insult of the entire Slytherin House. He turned to his teammates. "Flint? Malfoy? A word, please?"

The three stepped away while the Gryffindors and the other Slytherins postured towards each other. Then, after barely half a minute, they came back.

"How about this compromise, Wood?" said Flint with a somewhat malicious smile. "Instead of fighting over who gets the pitch, why don't we share it? We'll have a pick-up game. See how our two Seekers compare to one other." With that, he put his arm around Harry's shoulder like the boy was a beloved sibling.

"You're the Slytherin Seeker?!" exclaimed Jim.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how I stack up against you in the air ... Little Brother." Harry gave his best Slytherin sneer.

"You're on!"

"Potter!" snapped Oliver Wood. "That's not your call!"

"Come on, Wood!" said Flint with a smile. "This way, we both get a practice in this morning. What's the harm? Unless you don't think you're ready for us, of course."

Oliver snarled at his rival. "We're always ready for the likes of you, Flint!"

And to be honest, it looked like the Gryffindors were indeed ready for their rivals. The pick-up game lasted most of the morning, and the Gryffindors dominated almost from the start. While Flint and Pucey had developed considerable

teamwork since the year before, Draco was clearly not Chaser material and was completely unable to help them set up plays, let alone play any sort of competent defense against the well-oiled machine of Spinnet, Johnson and Bell. Miles Bletchley had definitely improved as Keeper, but he wasn't nearly as skilled as the obsessive and far more experienced Oliver Wood. Bole and Derrick, likewise, were not quite a match for the Weasley Twins and their uncanny ability to set one another up for well-timed Bludger attacks.

But the biggest problem for the Snakes seemed to be with the Seeker position. Jim struggled not to laugh at his older brother's inattention, as Harry spent nearly all his time watching the game below instead of looking for the Snitch. True, whenever Jim spotted it, Harry reacted quickly enough, but spotting the Snitch first was a huge advantage, and Harry's lack of attention allowed Jim to claim the Snitch in three out of four matches, with Harry's one win mainly a matter of lucky positioning rather than superior skill. When the teams finally broke for lunch, it was a subdued Slytherin team that headed towards the locker rooms. Cassius Warrington and some of his Pureblood friends were waiting for them at the door with smug expressions.

"What do you want, Warrington?" snarled Flint.

Warrington looked down his nose at the Captain. "To see if you'd come to your senses and realized the mistake you've made. It should be obvious that the blood traitor has no business being on the team."

Harry just shook his head. "It was only a pick-up game, Warrington," he said mildly.

"That doesn't matter. It was obvious that you're no match for your brother." He turned to Flint. "Malfoy should be

Seeker, I should be Chaser, and the blood traitor should be off scrubbing toilets or fraternizing with Mudbloods or something."

Flint's face hardened as he debated whether to punch Warrington's lights out, when a rather tired Draco finally spoke up. "Warrington, I *am* the Seeker. Potter's *the Chaser*. We just swapped positions for this morning."

"What?!" Warrington's face went from person to person in confusion. "But why would you do that? Why would you sacrifice a chance to use your best players against the Gryffindors?"

"Because we're *Slytherins*, Warrington," said Harry as if speaking to a small child. "And *real* Slytherins know when a victory *matters* and when it's meaningless and can be sacrificed for a greater purpose." Harry moved around Warrington to enter the locker room.

"I don't follow," said Warrington in confusion.

"Of course not," said Harry as he passed inside. "I said *real* Slytherins."

An hour later, after a shower and a quick lunch, it was a much more upbeat Slytherin team that congregated in the Seventh Year prefect's office. There, while partaking of butterbeer and snacks that had been smuggled into the dungeons, they took turns over the next four hours sticking their heads into Harry's penseive and taking careful notes as they reviewed Potter's remarkably vivid memories of every single play the Gryffindors made.

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***6 September 1992***



**8:00 a.m.**

The next morning as Harry was heading to Sunday breakfast, he saw a new and fairly large posting on the Slytherin bulletin board. It was the results of Lockhart's quiz. Harry was pleased to see that he had made the list of students who had scored high enough to avoid mandatory early morning P.E., but he was intrigued by his appointment to "Research Team *Protector*." Apparently, each of the teams had snazzy code names, including Team Recall, Team Backdoor, Team Counterstrike, Team Chameleon, and, most interestingly, Team *Mysterioso*, among a few others others. Marcus was also on Team Protector, while Blaise was on Team Recall, Draco was on Team Counterstrike and, to his surprise, Ginny was on Team Mysterioso, the only Slytherin First Year to make the cut. There were several other older Slytherins named who were not a part of his circle, most notably Warrington, who was on Team Backdoor. Harry was less pleased to see that the "organizational meeting" for Team Protector was later that afternoon at 4 p.m., as he'd planned to spend the afternoon flying.

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**1:00 p.m.**

**"TBD"**

At one o'clock, Hermione Granger entered the DADA classroom to find that it was empty. Her name had been listed among the Gryffindors who would serve on Lockhart's research teams, but she was somewhat perturbed to see that next to her name the sheet simply said "TBD – see Lockhart at 1:00 p.m. today." She was a bit nervous to see that she was the only "TBD" among the Gryffindors and even more so now that she realized she was the only one among the entire student body. At that point, the door to

Lockhart's office opened up and the man entered with his usual flair.

"Ah, Miss Granger. Thank you for joining me. Please take a seat." She dutifully did so. "Now, I suppose you're wondering why you're here alone. *Be not afraid!* As it turns out, you not only have the highest grade of any DADA student below Fifth Year, you also demonstrated some specialized knowledge that I believe makes you eligible to participate in not one but *two* of my research projects. I asked you to come here today to determine which one you would like to join." Hermione smiled and relaxed at that, as Lockhart continued. "Actually, to be *honest*, I asked you here to see if I could persuade you to participate in *both* of them. I know that doing so might represent a significant time investment for you, and I cannot give you extra points for participating in both projects as that would be unfair, I think, to your fellow students. Nevertheless, the two projects I have in mind might actually have some relationship to one another, and I think it might be beneficial to have someone on both teams who can look for common ground. Naturally, you would only have to submit one paper at the end of the year and would have your pick of which of the two projects you wished to write about."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. She was accustomed to being an overachiever but seldom had teachers willing to push her to this degree. "Well, Professor Lockhart, before I decide, I'd like to know a bit more about the projects, if that's okay."

"Certainly, Miss Granger. But first, answer me this question: How did you know my favorite color was *lilac*?"

She blinked in surprise. "Well ... it was in one of your books."

"Yes, but where specifically?"

Mildly confused by the question, Hermione closed her eyes and tried to remember. "I believe it was **Visiting with Vampires**, Chapter 19. You mentioned it was your favorite color when you were complementing the gown worn by Elizabeth Bathory, the Vampire Queen of Hungary."

"Indeed. And, just between us, my favorite color is actually *emerald green*. I just thought it prudent to exercise some politesse in that situation lest my bloodless corpse be found floating in the Danube. Next question: How did you know when my birthday was?"

"**Gadding with Ghouls**, Chapter 12. The hotel concierge in Monte Carlo wished you a happy birthday."

"Ah, yes. Good old Armand. *But* – the actual date wasn't mentioned in that chapter, was it?"

"No, sir, but the date *was* mentioned in Chapter 13, the events of which took place one day later."

Lockhart laughed. "Excellent, Miss Granger, excellent. As I suspected, you have an eidetic memory or something close to it. Which is why I would like for you to consider becoming a member of Research Team Recall. Team Recall is devoted to the study of memory charms, both how to better defend against them and how to more easily recover from them. Naturally, someone with your particular gifts would be a great boon to such research."

At that, Hermione found herself mildly shocked. Like Harry, she'd thought the personal questions about Lockhart were a sign of his vanity. It had not occurred to her that the answers to those questions were buried in Lockhart's books as trivia and that only someone with an exceptional memory

might have recalled them. Her estimation of the Professor suddenly rose several notches.

"Thank you, sir. And the other project?"

Lockhart hesitated. "Miss Granger, before I get into that, I must ask: Do you consider Miss Luna Lovegood to be a friend? Or, if not a friend exactly, then at least someone towards whom you feel protective?"

"Well, sir... to be honest, I haven't known Miss Lovegood for very long ... but yes, I do consider her a friend, and I suppose I am a bit protective of her." She paused and frowned. "Does this have something to do with ... *nargles*, sir?"

He smiled. "Very astute, Miss Granger. Out of the entire student body, only eight students gave *any* meaningful response to the question about nargles and wrackspurts, seven of whom gave a vague description followed by some variation on '*they're things that Luna Lovegood believes in.*' The eighth student was Miss Lovegood herself, who provided three feet of parchment about the creatures, including fairly detailed drawings. She also wrote very approvingly of the '*orderly and disciplined*' nature of your own nargles and wrackspurts which is another reason why I decided to approach you about this team."

"Professor Lockhart," Hermione began somewhat uncertainly, "are you saying that nargles and wrackspurts are ... *real*?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, Miss Granger? *I don't know.* That's why I asked the question." He rose from his desk and went over to a cabinet from which he withdrew what looked like a fairly old and battered Care of Magical Creatures text

book. From the cover, she saw that the title was **Beasts of the Magical World**, *Grade 5* by Edwina Farnsby.

"After I accepted my position here at Hogwarts, I decided to dig some old textbooks and class notes that had been put up in storage at Gringotts and refamiliarize myself with the curriculum as it was taught during my school days. It took a while to get them – my family has a history of ... protectiveness when it comes to our vaults, and I had to pass through a number of powerful and somewhat experimental wards in the process. As I was reviewing my old CoMC books looking for information about various creatures that might be relevant, I came across several entries on nargles, wrackspurts and certain other types of mind-affecting creatures that apparently are completely undetectable by magical or mundane means save for a rare few wizards and witches with the innate power to see them. But what was *most* intriguing about these entries is that I had absolutely no recollection of studying these creatures before *even though there were notes written in the margin in my own hand!*"

"Intrigued by that, as I normally have a very good memory, I began researching for these creatures elsewhere but could find no references to them from any other source. Not in any of Scamander's books nor in Lima's. Not even in the Encyclopedia Magica. I even wrote to Edwina Farnsby *herself* to ask about the creatures that *she had previously written about* and got a Howler in reply from the old witch telling me off for wasting her time with such nonsense! After that, I finally tracked down a second copy of **Magical Beasts of the World**, *Grade 5* that was published in the same year as the one from my vault, and do you know what I found?"

Hermione shook her head.

"The pages that had been devoted to nargles and wrackspurts in *my* copy of the book had been replaced in the other by completely different content detailing the various uses of *flubberworm mucous*!" Lockhart shook his head. "It's a remarkable mystery, Miss Granger, one for which I can only divine two possible solutions. One is that someone somewhere is playing an incredibly elaborate practical joke on me, one which involves Luna Lovegood and which apparently required the perpetrators to infiltrate my Gringotts vault!"

"And the other solution, Professor?" Hermione said in bafflement.

He sighed. "That wrackspurts and nargles do exist, and someone has gone to extraordinary lengths to make the entire world forget about them," he said simply.

Hermione simply stared at her professor, flabbergasted at the idea of a conspiracy so bizarre that it made the existence of Blibbering Humdingers seem tame in comparison.

# Team-Building Exercises (2)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 18: Team-Building Exercises (Pt 2)

**2:00 p.m.**

### ***Team Counterstrike***

Draco strode imperiously into the DADA classroom just before two o'clock and then stopped abruptly. Counting him, there were sixteen students in the room which was completely empty of all furniture other than a large green table divided in the middle by a small barrier made of some woven material. Draco looked around the room and immediately realized three things. First, he was the only Slytherin present. Second, with the exceptions of the Ravenclaw Cho Chang and the Hufflepuff Cedric Diggory, he was the only Pureblood in the room. In fact, if he was not mistaken, nearly half of the students in the room were either Muggle-born or Muggle-raised. Third, standing next to Chang and Diggory was Jim Potter who was actually *sneering at him* ... as if any Gryffindor ever had any business sneering at a Slytherin! Why it was practically a perversion of the natural order!

Undaunted, Draco made his way over to that group. He realized that the four of them represented all four of the school's Seekers. He also realized that no one outside his House was supposed to *know* that he was the Slytherin Seeker.

"I was expecting Harry instead of *you*, Malfoy. None of us have any idea how we got assigned to this group, so I'd assumed it was a Seeker thing."

"*Well*," Draco sniffed contemptuously. "It should be fairly obvious that I *should* be the Slytherin Seeker. Perhaps Lockhart took that into account."

Jim laughed. "Please. If my brother beat you as awful as he was yesterday, I don't even want to think about how bad you must be."

Draco's face reddened, but before he could retort, Chang spoke up. "Oh, cut it out, both of you! It's bad enough I'm giving up my Sunday afternoon to learn how to play *ping-pong* without having to listen to a bunch of Snake-vs.-Lion sniping!"

Draco did a double-take. "*Ping ... pong?*"

"Yeah," said Diggory. "It's a Muggle game. Justin knew what the table was immediately. He's got one at home. Says he's pretty good at it."

Malfoy looked over in the direction of the Muggleborn Justin Finch-Fletchley, who appeared to be demonstrating some sort of odd wand movements to the other students. The Pureblood gritted his teeth at the thought of fraternizing with such Mudbloods, particularly since he was under an Unbreakable Vow not to use that word in the presence of anyone who might be offended by it ... which appeared to be everyone in this room. However, the alternative to fraternizing with Mudbloods and Halfbloods in order to learn some poxied Muggle children's game was getting up at the crack of dawn every day for fitness training. He shuddered at the thought of running around Black Lake through six inches of snow once December



arrived. Suddenly, the door opened, and Lockhart entered with a flourish, carrying two small oddly-shaped wooden bats (like tiny round Beater's bats, the four Seekers noticed) and a white ball about the size of a Snitch.

"Good afternoon, students. Welcome to the introductory meeting for Research Team Counterstrike. Also known as 'Ping-Pong 101,' *ha-Ha!*" A few of the students laughed nervously, but most just stared at the man. "Now, I assume you all know what this is, but just in case some of you aren't up to speed, I shall explain. Ping pong, also known as table tennis, is a Muggle sport dating back just over 100 years. Its three components are the ping pong ball, the bat (or *paddle* in some countries) and the table." He held up the ball with one hand and one of the bats with another. "Mr. Finch-Fletchley, would you step forward please?"

A bit surprised, Justin stepped forward and accepted one of the bats which Lockhart offered him. "Now, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, you indicated that you have actually played this game competitively?"

"Yes, sir. The private academy I attended before Hogwarts had a table tennis club. I've also played in youth tournaments and even won a few in my age bracket."

"Excellent! Now, would you mind explaining the rules for the game for those unfamiliar with it. I'd do so myself, but I'm not too proud to defer to someone more experienced than I, regardless of their youth."

Justin nodded before turning and giving a brief description of the rules of ping pong before the dubious crowd. As he did so, Lockhart removed his cloak and the jacket he wore underneath and then rolled up his shirt sleeves. By the time

Justin was done, Lockhart had taken a position at one end of the table with the other bat in hand.

"Well summarized, Mr. Finch-Fletchley. Now, would you care to play against me for a bit to demonstrate?" The boy nodded and took up a position on the opposite side. "Now, do take it easy on an old man, Finch-Fletchley. I am an amateur at this, after all."

With that, Justin served a volley towards Lockhart who returned it easily. The two went back and forth for several minutes, and Justin quickly realized that while Lockhart might not be ready for competition play, he was no complete amateur either. Soon, Justin had actually moved a few feet back from the table into his competition stance, and Lockhart matched him. Their game play sped up as well, and soon the students who were unfamiliar with the game watched in astonishment at how fast the ball went back and forth. Finally, Justin lunged and hit the ball hard and with a spin, and it slipped past Lockhart's defense, bouncing off at the very edge of the table. Lockhart smiled, dropped his paddle, and applauded the boy, and the audience followed suit. Even Draco allowed himself to be impressed at the Mudblood's skill.

"Well done, Mr. Finch-Fletchley. Well done, indeed. Now, you may return to your fellow students." Justin left the paddle on the table and moved back to the group, where Cedric slapped him on the back genially.

"Now then," continued Lockhart. "You're all obviously impressed with young Finch-Fletchley's skills, but I'm sure you're also wondering *what on Earth* ping pong has to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts. And the answer is ... well, the answer is something I can't tell you, at least not yet. What I *can* tell you is this: There is a defensive spell I'll

be teaching later this year, probably in late November or early December. Hopefully, all of you will be here to learn it, but we shall see. The spell I'm thinking of is the preferred defense of some of the world's top champion duelists. It is also a spell that can save your life in a firefight against a dark wizard. Unfortunately, it is a spell that requires phenomenal dexterity, eye-hand coordination, and reflexes. And if you are *lacking* in those areas, the spell I'll be teaching will not help you at all and might very well get you killed if you attempt to rely on it in a life-or-death combat situation."

He turned and gestured towards the ping pong table. "Hence, *ping pong!* I am of the belief that the skill sets required for a successful ping pong player overlap those required for *the mystery spell*. If I am correct, I believe that this simple Muggle game can eventually become a valuable part of the auror training program. Or not. That's what research projects are for – to find out what works and what doesn't. That's also why I'm not telling you what the *mystery spell* is and *why I don't want any of you to go looking for it!* The whole point of this exercise is to see how well ping pong works as a training tool, and you'll ruin the project's experimental value if you learn the spell before I'm ready to teach it. Now, you'll find there is a room set aside on the third floor which now contains four ping pong tables with balls and bats in a nearby cupboard. Each of you has a bat with your name already on it. You may spend as much free time as you want practicing, and every two weeks, we will meet in that room to evaluate your progress."

He hesitated and then gave a sad expression. "While it's up to you how much practice time you want to spend, I should warn you that any students who clearly have no aptitude for

ping pong will eventually be removed from this Team and reassigned to the early morning physical fitness program."

At that, most of the students looked a bit nervous, especially those like Draco who had absolutely no familiarity with the game. Justin Finch-Fletchley also looked a bit nervous, but it was because he now suspected that *every single member* of Team Counterstrike was going to ask him for ping pong lessons. While the Hufflepuff in him was resigned to being a good sport and helping out whoever asked, the Capitalist Muggle in him said that he should probably consult with Harry for advice on how to leverage the first real advantage he'd had as a wizard since coming to Hogwarts.

Jim then raised his hand. "Sir, is there a reason all the Quidditch Seekers got put into this group?"

"There is, Mr. Potter. While there are, in my opinion, no wizarding sports which are comparable to ping pong for what I have in mind, the skills of a Seeker come closest of anything most wizards are familiar with."

"Well then," Jim continued. "Why isn't my brother here?"

Lockhart glanced at Draco and gave an unreadable expression before replying. "Whatever Harry Potter's skills as a Seeker, he has another characteristic which I thought made him a better fit for a different group."

"Which one?" Jim asked.

"Perhaps you should ask him that question for yourself, Mr. Potter. After all, you *are* brothers. I'm sure you're both close enough to have no secrets from one another." Lockhart smiled at that, but for once, he didn't give that awful

affected laugh. Nevertheless, Draco was sure that his smile was no more sincere than his laugh was.

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**2:30 p.m.**

### ***Marcus Flint's Room***

At half past two, while Draco Malfoy was continuing his immersion into the frightening world of Muggle ping pong, Harry Potter was on his way to the Seventh Year prefect's private room. He'd received a note via Theo saying that Marcus wanted to see him in his rooms about some "House matters." The fact that they were meeting in Marcus's rooms instead of the Prince's Lair indicated that someone else would be present who was not already aware of the secret chamber located just a few feet further down the hall.

*"Which reminds me," thought Harry, "I need to reset the password for the Lair so that Marcus and Missy can access it to study for their NEWTS."*

Melissa "Missy" Bulstrode was the sister of Harry's classmate Millicent Bulstrode and also the new female Seventh Year prefect. Her rooms were across the hall from Marcus's, so it was necessary to bring her into the secret of the Lair. After swearing Missy to appropriate oaths of secrecy, it had been surprisingly easy for Harry to win her support. She wanted to ace her NEWTS, she wanted her younger sister Milly to have a fair chance to play Quidditch when she got a few years older (Milly wanted to play *Beater*, of all things!), and as a Halfblood herself, she didn't care about Pureblood traditions to begin with. In fact, she was actually quite amused at the idea of Harry Potter, brother to the Boy-Who-Lived and the second most

prominent Halfblood in the school, being the secret master who ruled Slytherin House from the shadows.

At Marcus's door, Harry knocked respectfully and waited for the prefect to admit him. To his surprise, the other person in the room was a very nervous-looking Gregory Goyle. The hefty boy was actually sweating rather profusely. Marcus gestured for Harry to take a chair opposite Goyle, while he leaned against a wall nearby.

"Malfoy is off with Lockhart for whatever research nonsense he's on, so Goyle here thought it was a good time to come and talk with me. I think you need to hear what he has to say. Out with it, Goyle."

Goyle licked his lips nervously and looked up at Harry. "You ... you probably know that my family is a vassal family to House Malfoy, which is why I have to follow him around and be his ... well, his stooge. But I'm only twelve. I'm the Goyle Heir but I haven't taken any personal oaths to House Malfoy and won't have to until I'm fifteen. So until then, I have some ... liberties." He took a deep breath. "I was wondering if you might possibly be interested in having me to spy on Draco for you till then. I guess you know he's plotting against you, and I could let you know about what plots of his I can overhear. He's... prone to ... *ranting* about you when no one but me and Vince are around."

Harry crooked an eyebrow. "That's an interesting offer, Mr. Goyle, but I'm a bit curious as to what has brought this on. What do you want in exchange?"

Goyle swallowed at that. Harry was intrigued by the almost ... despairing look the boy gave him. "I ... need help. And I didn't know who else to ask, so I asked Flint, and he told me to talk to you. He said you could ... get things done."

Harry nodded impassively. "Go on."

Goyle hesitated. Then, he took a deep breath and dove right in. "My mother and father are the god-parents of Amy ... Amaryllis Wilkes. They didn't want to be. It was supposed to be Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, but they didn't want the stigma of having the last child of House Wilkes attached to them, so they fobbed it off on my family. I grew up with Amy ... Amaryllis..." He shook his head. "With *Amy*. She was always kind of like a little sister. My parents didn't care about her at all. They didn't abuse her or anything, but they definitely didn't care about her. They just stuck her off in a small bedroom at the end of the children's wing with some dolls, a lot of books, and a house elf to look after her. But she and I still grew up together. We were both only children, and we were stuck with each other. Maybe that's what gave Father the idea ..."

He paused and rubbed his fingers over his eyes. "The Wilkeses still have money ... somewhere. Vaults full of galleons ... and probably a fortune in dark artifacts and books. But Amy can't touch it because she's a girl and the Wilkes family is patri ... patra..."

"Patrilineal," said Harry gently.

"Yeah, that. She can't inherit, but she might someday give birth to a male heir who would be able to if he shows magic." He hesitated. "Father has drawn up a marriage contract between Amy and me, with himself automatically appointed as regent for any male children born of the marriage. He reckons there must be enough galleons in the Wilkes vaults to pay off the debts we owe the Malfoys and establish House Goyle as a truly independent House."

Harry nodded. "And you are not happy with the idea of marrying Amy Wilkes someday just to please your father?"

"It's not *that*!" he said excitedly. "I mean, I like Amy. She's a little hard-edged. Who wouldn't be with the life she's led! But she's not as cold as she seems, and anyway, I've known her my whole life. Maybe when we're older ..." He took another shaky breath. "My father's not a patient man, though. He's in a real bad hurry for some reason to get at the Wilkes estate, and he doesn't want to wait until we're graduated and out in the world before he can exercise his contract rights. And I guess, if I were old enough, he wouldn't have regency rights over my son anyway. He ... he wants me and Amy to get married ... right after my OWLs."

At that, Harry did a double-take. "He wants you to drop out of school – you at fifteen, and Amy at fourteen – and start making babies just so he can gain access to the Wilkes fortune?!"

"Oh, just wait," said Marcus darkly. "It gets worse."

Harry's eyes widened at that, and he turned back to Goyle. "Go on, Mr. Goyle. Please tell me the rest."

Goyle looked down at the floor as if to collect himself before looking back up at Harry, who was surprised to see a depth of feeling in the boy's expression there that he'd never noticed before. "I ... I'm not a smart guy. I know that. Not like you or Draco. I try, but I'm not smart. Miss Granger worked really hard with me and Vince last year, and we passed everything, but neither of us did especially well. Father ... he let me know the night before we got on the train... if it looks like I'm gonna flunk my OWLs ... he has a backup plan."



Harry grimaced. If Plan A was to marry his son and his god-daughter off as teenagers, he shuddered to think what Plan B was. Goyle's sickened expression didn't reassure him either.

"If my grades don't pick up, he's gonna dissolve the marriage contract between me and Amy and set up a new one ... with *the House of Nott*. He figures he can get a big enough bride price to cover his needs from Old Tiberius. "

Harry sputtered uncontrollably. "He wants to marry Amy Wilkes off to *Theo*!"

"Even worse," sighed Marcus.

Harry's head snapped around at that. "What ... *Alexander* Nott? The Heir?"

Goyle shook his head despairingly, and suddenly, Harry realized the truth: not either son, but *the father*! Instantly, Harry felt a sudden sharp pain from both his hands. He looked down and was startled to realize it came from clenching his fists so tight that his nails had dug into his palms almost hard enough to draw blood. He could not remember the last time he had been so angry.

"So," thought Harry as he ran through a quick Occlumency exercise to bring his temper under control. "*Amy Wilkes, currently aged twelve, is to be married off to Tiberius Nott, a fifty-year-old ex-Death Eater. Who also murdered his last wife outright after first nearly killing her on accident with a potion designed to influence the gender of their children, a potion he would almost certainly force upon Amy to get the male heir he needs to seize the Wilkes fortune. And it was all Amy's god-father's idea!*"

The Occlumency finally washed away Harry's fury, and he regarded Goyle coolly.

"Does she know?" he asked. Goyle shook his head no. Harry considered that along with all the other information Goyle had provided. "Why have you come to us with this? You're friends – sort of – with Draco Malfoy. Do you think it would somehow be *worse* if Lucius Malfoy became aware of this?" He thought for a second. "Or do you think he *already is*?"

Goyle shook his head helplessly. "I don't know. I don't think so, but it's possible. I know Draco is out to get you, but he has to be careful about how he does it. And I know that somebody tried to kill you not long ago with one of Wilkes' toys. I guess it's possible that Draco's parents were behind that and they want to use Amy to get more weapons from whatever legacy Wilkes left. I figured better safe than sorry."

Harry nodded at that. He could imagine scenarios in which Lucius Malfoy was out to kill him, though probably not by any means as clumsy and messy as the ones he'd seen so far. Still Dobby obviously knew something, and from what he knew of the Wilkes estate, there were enough assets to attract Lucius's attention.

"What do you ask of me, Mr. Goyle?"

"I want ... I want Amy to be free and safe, with a chance to live her life without all this," the boy made a face, "stupid Death Eater crap!"

"Does that mean you also want to be free of ... '*stupid Death Eater crap*'?"

Goyle looked down again. "I dunno. I don't think I have a choice. I've been raised to believe the things a Pureblood

should, but then, I got here and found out that I can't hold a candle to a Mud ... to a Muggleborn like Granger. Not only that, but I'd have probably flunked out my first year if Draco hadn't hired her to tutor me." He shuddered. "Father didn't like that at all, but since Draco set it up, he couldn't say much about it. Honestly? Right now, I'm just doing what I'm told. Just like I'll do what I'm told when I'm Lord Goyle and I still have to do whatever Lord Malfoy says."

"Even if Lord Malfoy says he wants you to get a snake tattoo on your arm?"

Goyle paled and then looked away. "Probably," he said quietly.

Harry stared at him intently before speaking. "You will swear a secrecy oath not to reveal any of my secrets without my consent. In particular, you will not reveal anything you have heard or said or learned in this meeting. I will make arrangements for your tutoring to continue, whether by Miss Granger or someone else your father wouldn't object to. You will *push yourself* to whatever extremes are necessary to get your grades up to the appropriate level. In return, I will do everything I can to protect Miss Wilkes and free her from your father's influence. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes!" The other boy shook his head excitedly. "Yes, we do! Thank you!"

"*And* since you've agreed to keep my secrets, Gregory Goyle, there are something you ought to know. You see, Draco didn't *arrange* for you to be tutored by Miss Granger out of the goodness of his heart. *I* engineered that and forced Malfoy to go along with it, in part because I was concerned that it would reflect poorly on Slytherin House if

two sons of Noble Houses flunked out their first year. I don't *care* how dumb other people have told you that you are. You are Goyle of Goyle, and this year, you *will* step up your game and you *will* act like the scion of a Noble House, even if your father is unworthy of having such a son. Because there's not a damned thing I can do to save Miss Wilkes if you fail your classes and your father sells her out to Lord Nott before I set a plan in motion. Understood?"

Goyle went pale and nodded affirmatively. Then, he pulled out his wand and swore the secrecy oath.

"Thank you for this, Potter."

"When Draco or his friends aren't around, Mr. Goyle, please feel free to call me Harry."

He smiled. "Only if you will call me Gregory." Then, he paused. "Actually, if you don't mind, I'd prefer it if you called me Greg. Gregory is my Father's name. I don't want to use it."

"Greg it is." With that, the relieved Second Year left Flint's room. Marcus's face hardened as he moved to sit down in the chair Goyle had vacated.

"Do you think Theo would mind terribly if his father were found bludgeoned to death in an alley?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "Probably not, so long as the killer left a pensive memory of it for his future enjoyment. Of course, Tiberius Nott isn't the real issue. In fact, it's possible he doesn't know about any of this since Goyle Sr. would have to go behind Lucius's back to set it up, and the fealty oaths probably still forbid it at the moment. I am ... reliably informed that Lucius and Tiberius are not as close as they once were."

"Hmm. In other news, you realize you're now signed up as the protector for Erasmus Wilkes's daughter. I'm sure that will make you unpopular in some quarters."

Harry looked away and shrugged. "The oaths we just swore weren't actually reciprocal, and to be honest, I can probably do more to protect Wilkes if no one *knows* I'm looking out for her. That said, the girl is an orphan being taken advantage of by those who should be protecting her. I have ... *issues* with that sort of thing."

Marcus snorted. "*Teen Witch Weekly* has *issues*, Potter! You're way beyond that!"

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***3:05 p.m.***

### ***Classroom 314 (aka the Ping Pong Room)***

After leaving the DADA classroom, Draco stopped off to talk with Daphne Greengrass who was just coming in for the 3:00 p.m. team meeting. Something to do with chameleons, apparently. Then, he made his way upstairs to check out the room that had been set aside for Team Counterstrike's personal training. As he approached, he noticed the sound of a rhythmic tapping coming from inside. Walking through the door, he was pleased to see that the only other person in the room was the Mudblood Puff Justin Whatshisname, who was idly walking around the room inspecting the tables. He had one of the ping pong bats in his hand, and the tapping sound came from the ball that he was almost absentmindedly bouncing up and down on the bat. The boy noticed Draco's entrance and gave him a friendly smile. With some effort, Draco smiled back at him.

"Why hello again, Mr. Malfoy," the Mudblood said. "Fancy a quick game? I promise I'll take it easy on you. I know this

isn't exactly a Pureblood's sport."

"Certainly, Mr., um, Finch, I believe?"

"Finch-Fletchley," the Mudblood answered easily.

"Yes, Finch-Fletchley. I must admit I know nothing about this game except what you and Professor Lockhart showed us earlier."

"I believe you'll find a bat with your name on it in the locker over there. It's not a complicated game, just one that requires the development of certain physical skills." The Mudblood gestured over towards a cabinet where Draco did indeed find a bat with the name "*D. Malfoy*" printed on it. After a quick refresher of the rules, Draco and the Mudblood started their game. Draco actually did pick up the basics fairly quickly, though he was acutely aware of the fact that the Mudblood was completely in control of the game and hardly using a fraction of the speed he displayed against Lockhart earlier.

"I must say, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, your command of this game is most impressive."

"Why thank you, Mr. Malfoy."

"Tell me, would you be interested in providing lessons on this game? In light of what Professor Lockhart said, I'm very anxious to do well at this. I was thinking of, perhaps, a galleon or so every four hours of practice?"

"Hmm, well to be honest, I'm afraid that my schedule is very busy this term, and anyway, I'm not terribly interested in picking up a few extra galleons here and there if it requires too much of a time investment. I'm sure you understand."

"Ah, the Hufflepuff work ethic," said Draco as he struggled to conceal his contempt for that same mentality.

*"Typical," he thought. "A stupid Mudblood Puff who wouldn't recognize a good business opportunity if it bit him on the nose."*

"No, not really the Hufflepuff work ethic so much as a Muggleborn perspective. There's a Muggle expression – perhaps you've heard of it – '*Time is money*.' It means that even if you profit from spending your time doing something, you may have actually lost money if in doing so you ignored the opportunity to benefit more from doing something else. I mean, would *you* consider it a profitable use of your time to work for someone else, even at something you enjoyed, for the sum of one galleon every four hours?"

"Well, no," said Draco who was becoming annoyed with the Mudblood's ability to talk about philosophical matters while casually parrying every one of Malfoy's returns. "Of course, it's a bit different for me. Not to sound arrogant or anything, but ... well, I am rather rich."

The Mudblood smiled. "So I've heard, Mr. Malfoy. I'm told your father is considered the sixth wealthiest wizard in Magical Britain, with a net worth somewhere in the neighborhood of 63 million galleons. I reckon that's about £335 million at the current rate of exchange."

Draco blinked at that and nearly missed the Mudblood's return volley. "Hmm. I suppose so," he replied in a neutral voice. "I don't actually know the current galleon to, er, pound exchange rate."

"Really?" the Mudblood replied, sounding almost amused. "You'll find the goblins update the exchange rate between the galleon and every major Muggle currency weekly. It's

posted in the *Daily Prophet* every Monday morning on the first page of the financial section."

"*The goblins have a variable exchange rate between galleons and Muggle currencies that they adjust on a weekly basis?*" thought Draco. "*Why didn't I know that? For that matter, why didn't I know that the Prophet has a financial section?!*" But instead of all that, Draco merely said "Um-hmm."

"Anyway, Mr. Malfoy, the thing is, well, not to sound *arrogant or anything*, but that figure I just mentioned? That £335 million? Well, if you were to multiply that figure by a factor of four, the result would be slightly less than the combined net worth of my own parents."

At that, Draco nearly lost his balance, as the ping pong ball slipped past his defense and, in fact, the paddle itself slipped from his grasp and landed on the floor. He starred at the ... (*incredibly rich?*) Mudblood for several seconds in amazement.

"Your parents' net worth is over ...?" Draco stopped, suddenly unable to perform basic maths in his head.

"About £1.3 billion. Just north of 250 million galleons. Of course, that's without considering my maternal grandfather's assets. His name is Jonathan Woodnutt, but he's better known among British Muggles as *His Grace, the Duke of Forgill*. He's 72, and while I hope he continues to live to a ripe old age, when he dies his own wealth and his Dukedom will pass to my mother, who is his sole heir. As I understand it, that's expected to raise my parents' net worth to something just over £3 billion. So you can see, Mr. Malfoy, why I'm not terribly excited at the thought of teaching ping pong for a quarter-a-galleon per hour." The



(*no longer a*) Mudblood smiled at Draco. "Is there perchance anything else you might be able to offer me in exchange for lessons, Mr. Malfoy?"

The Pureblood stood almost frozen, as beliefs he'd held his entire life but which were now suddenly brought into contradiction strove for dominance. Had the son of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy been asked a week earlier, he'd have never guessed which of those beliefs would win out. Finally, he smiled at the Wizard. It was surprisingly genuine. "Please," he said amiably. "Call me Draco!"

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1. The Dukedom of Forgill is fictitious. The Duke of Forgill was an important character from the late-1970's Doctor Who serial "Terror of the Zygons," and Jonathan Woodnut was the now deceased character actor who portrayed him.

AN 2. The canon books are vague on how rich the Finch-Fletchleys are beyond the fact that Justin was set for Eton before he got his Hogwarts letter. I was amused by the idea of how Draco would react to learning that a classmate who was both a Muggleborn and a Hufflepuff was much richer than him by a whole bunch. Still not entirely sure how the Draco-Justin relationship is going to go, but we'll all found out together. (And I just updated this because previously I had used the phrase "by several orders of magnitude" as an attempt at amusing hyperbole and didn't realize it would bring out all the math-majors in force. Yeesh.)

# Team-Building Exercises (3)

## CHAPTER 19: Team-Building Exercises (Pt. 3)

**4:00 p.m.**

### ***Team Protector***

At four o'clock, Harry and Flint entered the DADA class room. Harry was pleased to see that Neville was also on this team, but he didn't really know any of the others very well. The room had been cleared of most of the chairs, leaving enough for each team member arranged in a loose circle. There were five other students, all upperclassmen: three Puffs and two Gryffs, one of whom was Head Girl Emily Rossen. Harry was somewhat surprised to note that no Ravenclaws were assigned to this team, and Flint said that other than Harry and Neville, everyone else in this research group was Fifth Year or higher. After a minute or so, Lockhart strode into the room with his typical flair.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentle-wizards, welcome to Research Team Protector. Please take a seat. Before we start, I should warn you in advance that I believe this group will face the most challenging year of all the research teams. While your assignment will be difficult, I have every confidence that you will give me your best effort, and I promise you that I will be fully satisfied with your best effort, even if you ultimately fail to attain this team's objective. You see, you have each been selected for this research team so that you may *hopefully* learn one of the most powerful and yet most difficult defensive Charms known to wizarding kind – *the Patronus Charm!*" With that, Lockhart pulled out his wand, pointed at the floor in the center of the group.

**"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"** he intoned. Instantly, there was a blast of a glowing fog that erupted from the tip of his wand, a fog which quickly coalesced into a strange translucent silvery beast the likes of which Harry had never seen before. It was a lithe and sinewy quadruped with a long thin tail, oddly shaped hind legs, and black stripes along its back. From the head, Harry couldn't tell if it was a dog or a cat, but it was clearly a predator of some kind to judge by the size of its teeth and the obvious strength of its jaws. The creature walked slowly around the center of the room sniffing the air as if looking for some kind of threat. Then, it yawned, frightening several of the students, as the strange beast was able to open its jaws unnaturally to well over ninety degrees.

"*That, ladies and gentle-wizards, is my Patronus. A Patronus is, for lack of a better description, a spirit guardian - a creature of pure magic drawn from the wizard or witch's positive thoughts and summoned into existence as a protector and guardian. The Patronus can defend you against nearly any predator. It can follow fairly complex instructions so long as the task you give it involves protecting yourself or others. It is the only known spell capable of inflicting any harm at all on either a Dementor or a lethifold, and it can ward off vampires, werewolves and most other 'Dark' creatures. It is also a highly effective form of communication. A wizard can will his Patronus to deliver a message to anyone in the world provided it is someone the wizard considers a friend or ally, and it will instantly apparate to that location to open up a line of communication.*" The class was enthralled watching the beautiful yet deadly looking creature as it walked around the room. Lockhart waved his wand, and the Patronus faded away.

"The Charm has two deficiencies, however. First, it is a tremendous drain on power, and only the most formidable of wizards can maintain a Patronus for more than a few minutes. Secondly, and more importantly, the Patronus Charm is *extremely* difficult to cast and maintain. Not because of the wand movements or the incantation – no, no, both of those are quite simple. No, my students, the Patronus Charm is difficult because it falls within that class of spells known as *esoteric magic*. I see some of you recognize the term from the pop quiz I gave you, though no one below Sixth Year had any idea what it meant. You see, virtually all the Charms you will learn during your Hogwarts studies are categorized as *standard* spells. You speak the right words. You wave your wand in the right way. And *voila!* The magic happens. Even so-called wandless and wordless magic are still considered standard magic, as they both require the wizard to *imagine* that he is casting the spell with wand and incantation and do so with sufficient mental clarity to satisfy the spell's requirements. Esoteric spells, however, require a *third* ingredient. You must actually *think* a certain way while casting and maintain that requisite state of mind for as long as the magical effect lasts. Allow your self to become distracted and thus unable to maintain that necessary state of mind, and the spell will fail."

"We will be exploring several different esoteric spells in this class as a prelude to studying the Patronus Charm, and don't be upset if you're not able to master it, at least this year. As I said, it is one of the most difficult spells to learn, mainly due to its complex esoteric components. You see, to cast the Patronus Charm successfully, you must be able to focus on your happiest memory for the duration of the casting. Many people are completely unable to cast the Patronus Charm because they simply don't have memories that are *happy enough* to satisfy the spell's requirements.

Such truly happy memories are, sadly, rare in these fallen times. Conversely, other people who are generally happy in their lives are also unable to cast the Patronus because they do not have enough *unhappy* memories to provide a meaningful contrast to the happy ones. Surprisingly, the wizards who have the easiest time casting the spell are those whose lives have been marred by tragedy and thus can genuinely treasure the happy moments. That is why I asked several questions on my quiz designed to force students to articulate what reviewing a particularly happy memory *felt like*, and those of you who demonstrated evidence of a strong happy memory were chosen for this group."

"Unfortunately, there is a second requirement which makes the spell even harder. For you see, it is not enough to think of a happy memory. You must *also* maintain those feelings of happiness *even when you are afraid for your life*. Only the most disciplined mind is able to continue focusing on a happy memory while, say, a Dementor is bearing down on you ready to suck all your happy memories away! And the converse is also true. To summon the Patronus under *safe* conditions, as I just did, you must be able to focus on a sufficiently happy memory while *imagining* feelings of extreme danger. It is this dual thought process that presents most of the spell's difficulty."

Harry took all this in impassively. He still distrusted Lockhart because he obviously acted like a buffoon before his fans while downplaying his obvious knowledge of obscure and powerful magic. And he *certainly* wasn't going to answer any questions about what his own happy memory was: the first time he entered the Lair and talked with the Hydra. That said, Harry knew that Olivia Kolumbiko had learned to summon a corporeal Patronus as a Fifth Year because doing so gave a considerable number of bonus

points on the DADA OWL, so it wasn't impossible for a student. Of course, Olivia was *brilliant*, and according to her, only five other students had mastered the Charm during her time at Hogwarts, all of them Sixth or Seventh Years. It seemed remarkable that Lockhart would presume to think he could teach the Charm to *eight* students, two of them just Second Years, in the space of one school year. On the other hand, he could cast the Charm *himself*, so he obviously knew more about the Patronus than most people. And *what was* that strange creature? Harry had never seen or heard of any animal like the one Lockhart summoned as a Patronus!

"We will not begin with the Patronus initially, of course," Lockhart continued. "Rather, we will start off with simpler esoteric spells. Over the next two weeks, please spend some time reviewing the notes accompanying **Gadding with Ghouls** that pertain to the illusive *boggart* as well as the Boggart-Banishing Charm, which requires you to look upon the face of your deepest fears ... and then imagine it instead as something funny. And between now and then, meditate on what frightens you the most, and then, on how to make it look ... *ridiculous*."

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**8:00 p.m.**

### ***Team Backdoor***

George Weasley looked around the room warily. As a Fourth Year, he was one of the youngest member of Team Backdoor and so far, it looked like he was the only Gryffindor as well, but the true reason for his nervousness lay in the fact that he had been picked for this group, while his twin brother Fred was stuck doing early morning P.E. along with Ron and most of the other Gryffs. It was ... a sore subject between

the Twins. It didn't help that the older team members looked to be a Slytherin-Ravenclaw mix, and they were all looking at him with overt suspicion, especially Warrington, the biggest Pureblood tosser in their year. Lucian Bole and Melissa Bulstrode, while not as bigoted, didn't seem any friendlier, and for that matter, neither did any of the 'Claws. Nestled as he and Fred had been within the cocoon of Gryffindor tomfoolery for the past three years, he was rather unnerved to suddenly realize just how much hostility there was for the Weasley Terrors in the more serious-minded Houses.

Soon, Lockhart came in and gave his introductory speech to the group. The purpose of Team Backdoor, according to the man, was to study the nature of certain high level wards, learn how to improve upon them and eventually how to circumvent them. Specifically, his goal was to develop what he called a "Super-Portkey" that could pass through an anti-Portkey ward. Apparently, during the War, the Dark Mark cast up in the night sky by attacking Death Eaters was not just a symbol of terror. It also generated anti-apparation and anti-portkey jinxes over the targeted building so that the victims could not escape. George was also a bit surprised when Lockhart gave several surprisingly lurid descriptions of the sorts of things that Death Eaters did to Muggleborn who were unable to escape their clutches, and by the time he was done, even Warrington looked a bit shaken.

The Super-Portkey, according to Lockhart, would be able to punch through the strongest anti-portkey wards and carry people to safety. However, since the aurors legitimately used anti-portkey jinxes to prevent criminals from escaping, the team members would have to agree to secrecy oaths, and if they succeeded in creating a Super-Portkey, any prototypes they created would be turned over to the

Ministry, which could then provide them to targeted populations in the event of future terrorism or insurrection. Since the Ministry would control the Super-Portkeys, they would most likely be limited to sending travelers either to St. Mungo's or to a DMLE facility.

After explaining the nature of the group's work and assigning a number of books to review which were held in reserve for the team in the school library, Lockhart dismissed the group after just twenty minutes but asked George to remain behind.

"Well, Mr. Weasley, now that you've heard what Team Backdoor is all about, what do you think?" Lockhart asked conversationally.

"It's a good idea, sir. I wish they'd had something like this during the War." He hesitated. "My uncles, Gideon and Fabian Prewitt, well, they got trapped by the kind of wards you've been talking about when the Death Eaters came for them. A Super-Portkey like what you're proposing might have saved their lives."

"I'm glad to see you're taking it so seriously ... or at least that you seem to be taking it seriously. I hope you won't take offense to this, Mr. Weasley, but, well, I'd been warned about you by some of the other teachers. Actually, to be honest, it was *all* of the other teachers. You and your twin have a bit of a reputation." George grimaced at that.

"In fact," Lockhart continued. "I was somewhat surprised by your test results, especially compared to his. Although your scores were, to be frank, near the bottom edge of those students who I accepted for research teams, you were nevertheless one of the highest performing Fourth Years, behind only Mr. Diggory and Miss Chang. Your peer Mr.



Warrington barely snuck in because his father works in the Department of Magical Transportation and so Warrington is more familiar with the Portkey procedures than the average student. *However*, your twin brother actually scored a perfect *zero* and, in fact, deliberately misspelled his own name on the top of the first page. So I suppose I am compelled to ask – are you going to be serious about this work? Or is this part of some grand prank you and your brother have planned for the future? Because, Mr. Weasley, I enjoy a prank as much as the next wizard, but I also want to *save lives*, and I think these projects can help to achieve that."

George swallowed. He was not in the habit of opening up to teachers. Or really anyone other than a family member, and sometimes not even then. But for some reason, this was suddenly important to him, even more so now that he knew what the project was actually about, and honestly, it still annoyed him that Fred felt so differently about it.

"My brother and I ... had an argument the night before we took the test. We'd been talking about how we're Fourth Years now and maybe it's time to grow up a little. I said that this might be a good start. Do good on your test and show everyone that we're not just a couple of goof-offs. But Fred figured that our younger brother Ron wasn't likely to make any of the teams and ..." He hesitated for a few seconds.

"Well, the thing of it is – we haven't rightly treated Ron well over the last few years. Fred wanted to make sure we got into the P.E. class so we could spend a little more time with him, since Second Years and Fourth Years don't normally share classes. I didn't exactly disagree with that, but I still wanted to see what I could do on your test if I really tried. I honestly wasn't expecting to make it in."

"And now that you are '*in*,' how do you feel about it? I can't help but notice that you seemed uncomfortable during the orientation session. Is that a Gryffindor-Slytherin thing? Or is there something specific that troubles you about this group? If you don't think you would be able to work well with Warrington and the others, I can tell you that I *almost* put you on Team Chameleon with your brother Percy and with Miss Lavender Brown. It's primarily a potion-brewing team and I thought that might bore you, but I still can switch you to that group or even to the morning P.E. group, whichever you prefer, if you don't believe you can work effectively with a group that's half Slytherin. To be honest, while I wish my students could overcome their House rivalries, I consider this project too-important to risk it being disrupted by such conflicts."

George looked down at the table in front of him. Oddly, his thoughts were filled by what Ginny had told him about her Sorting. "*Do you want people to think you're brave? Or do you want to be brave?*" the Hat had said. He took a deep breath.

"If it's all the same to you, sir. I'd rather stick it out with this group. I promise you that I won't be the one to start anything. I'll still *defend* myself if Warrington or somebody comes after me, but I won't *start* anything."

"Excellent! Well, I think that's all. I'll see you in class later this week." George nodded and headed for the door when Lockhart stopped him. "Oh, and Mr. Weasley? Two things. First, I didn't know Gideon and Fabian Prewitt well, but from their reputations, they were both fine wizards. You are a credit to their memory."

George smiled bashfully. "Thank you, sir."

"And second, don't let any of this drive a wedge between you and your brothers. Family is important. A lot of people never realize how much until it's too late."

The Gryffindor was surprised at how serious the man seemed. He nodded. "I won't, sir. I promise."

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***8:30 p.m.***

### ***The Prince's Lair***

"Right," said Harry as he showed Melissa Bulstrode around the Prince's Lair. "And over here is the part you'll actually care about: the Slytherin Library. And specifically, this book." He pulled out the weighty, unlabeled tome and laid it on the table. "The NEWTs Book. It has every question that has been asked on every NEWT exam given in the last fifty years. The answers aren't included but there are citations to where the answers can be found, so it won't actually let you cheat but it's still an impressive study aid. You can also help yourself to all three volumes of Salazar Slytherin's memoirs, as well as any of these books here." Harry gestured towards three shelves of old grimoires.

"Unfortunately, the rest of the library is still heavily warded and will be until I'm confirmed as Prince, which is somewhat unlikely to happen before the start of my Fifth Year at the earliest."

Melissa nodded. "And I'm assuming nobody can take any of these books out of here?"

"Correct. Only the actual Prince can carry anything out past the threshold of the Lair without special permission from the Hydra. And while the Hydra likes me – well, most of it does – it's still stingy with the books. And the Floo

is *completely* out of the question, never mind how incredibly convenient it would be."

Suddenly, Melissa was startled as the silver boomslang head of the Hydra twisted around and hissed something at Harry. She was even more unnerved when he hissed something right back and then went over and tickled the snake under the chin causing it to laugh softly. Then, the krait head twisted around and up towards his hand and snapped at it, though apparently more in annoyance than any actual hostility. Harry jerked his hand back and then hissed at the krait in a tone that, for some reason, Melissa thought sounded sarcastic. Harry looked back at the older girl and noticed her expression.

"Sorry. Delilah here was reassuring me that if she had her way, I'd already be Prince. I told her that I understand and that I can be patient. Then, Nidhogg snapped at me because he's a grumpy old krait and flirtatiousness annoys him." At that, the krait hissed petulantly.

"Uh-huh," she replied nonchalantly. "And just to clarify one more time: You're *absolutely sure* that you're not a dark wizard who wants to raise an army of dark creatures to conquer Britain?"

Harry sighed. "Absolutely 100% sure. I'm a perfectly bona fide wizard who wants to take over Magical Britain through completely legal political maneuvers."

Marcus, who was sitting in one of the other chairs with his feet propped up on the table, snickered at that. "Good one, Potter. Oh, and before you forget and leave us stuck in here all night, what's the new password?"

"*Moldy Shorts*," replied Harry, causing Marcus to laugh again even louder and Melissa to roll her eyes. Harry

turned back to her. "Oh, and the password won't work if anyone is in the corridor who hasn't been cleared to enter, by which I mean the three of us, plus Blaise Zabini and Theo Nott. I *may* let Malfoy in on it if he plays nice this year. Anything else?" Both prefects shook their heads. "Good. I'm off to bed then." And with that, Harry passed through the portal, leaving the Lair to the two Seventh Years.

"Gotta say, Bulstrode," said Flint. "You're adapting to all this pretty well."

She shrugged. "I'm a Halfblood Slytherin, Flint. Adaptation is just part of the game. Besides, I can see already why *you* follow him. He's charismatic, disturbingly intelligent, ruthless with his enemies, protective of his friends. Plus, for a twelve-year-old, he's kinda cute."

Flint coughed. "I wouldn't know anything about *that*, Bulstrode."

"Of course not, Flint," Melissa replied sweetly. "I wouldn't dream of implying otherwise."

He glowered at that. "Just shut up and hand me the NEWT book."

She snickered, sat down at the table, and slid the book across to him.

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***10:45 p.m.***

### ***Gryffindor Common Room***

"Honestly, are you *still* mad about this?" asked George.

"I'm not ... mad," replied Fred. "I'm just disappointed. I mean, we've never been split up into different classes before."

"Well, we may be twins, Brother-Of-Mine, but we're not ... *conjoined*. I mean, we're both fourteen. If I ask a girl out on a date, are you gonna want to come along?"

"Who are you looking to ask out on a date?!" asked Fred in surprised.

"Not. The. Point." said George through gritted teeth. "You know, Lockhart knows you deliberately failed his test. I mean, you weren't exactly subtle about it. If you went and talked to him, he *might* let you retake it."

Fred thought for a moment and then shook his head. "Nah. I made my bed. I guess I can lie in it. Or do early morning calisthenics in it, I suppose. Besides, we'd talked about spending more time with Ron. This gives me an excuse to do it."

"Why Fred! I didn't know you cared!" said Ron snarkily from behind the sofa. Both Twins jumped up with a joint "*Gaah!*"

"Ron! What the devil are you doing back there? Spying on us?"

"Actually, I was here first. I was trying to finish my reading for tomorrow and hiding out from everyone who keeps bugging me to play chess with them. And then, you two sat down and started getting sappy. Sorry if I startled you."

"No problem." "Anyway, since you're here..." The twins suddenly paused in their back-and-forth. "Well, we've been

talking a lot about what you said last week" "and ... we really are sorry." "What can we do" "to make it up to you?"

Ron laughed genially as he rose to walk around the sofa and sit between the two Twins, stuffing his notebook and Potions text in his book bag as he did. "It's okay. *Really*. And I'm sorry too, guys. I was just ... really upset about that Howler and I took it out on you. Can you forgive me?"

Both Twins seemed genuinely touched that Ron would ask forgiveness of *them* after everything that had been said.

"Let's just all forgive each other and start over, okay" said George. "So, um, are you upset that you didn't get onto a research team?"

The boy shrugged. "Not too many Second Years did. Only about eight, I think, out of a class of forty. In fact, Jim's pretty sure that he and Draco only made it in because of Quidditch. Something to do with an experiment in eye-hand coordination Lockhart's running. Anyway, Jim says that even though he's on a research team, he'll still be joining us most days for P.E. We'd both planned to run and workout in the mornings anyway, so this way we'll just be doing it in a crowd. Might make it easier to get up on time in the mornings." He snickered and then turned to George. "Say, if you're really feeling bad because you're on a research Team and me and Fred aren't, you're welcome to get up at dawn with the rest of us. I'm sure the exercise would do you good."

Ron managed to keep a straight face for almost three seconds before he burst out laughing at George's horrified expression. Fred was confused for a second, but then, he started laughing as well.

"Well, how about that, Brother-Of-Mine? Our little Ron can do pranks after all. I didn't know he had it in him!"

Ron smiled. "How would you have known? You never involve me in any of your pranks except when I'm the target of them." The Twins suddenly grew quiet, and Ron rolled his eyes. "I didn't mean it like *that*. I'm just saying it might be ... *nice* to be involved in your pranks sometime. Did it ever occur to you that your little brother might want follow in your footsteps?"

The Twins eyes lit up at that, and they smiled in unison. "Do you have anything specific in mind?" "Oh, dear under-appreciated brother of ours?"

Ron smiled. "Oh, I don't know. I did have a few ideas that might ... liven things up around here."

And that was how the Great Prank War of 1992 got started.

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***11:55 p.m.***

### ***Gilderoy Lockhart's Private Quarters***

The DADA instructor sat at the private desk in his living quarters reading a book. Specifically, if one were to judge a book by its cover, Lockhart was reading once more from his own autobiography, **Magical Me**. The book was floating in mid-air, and when he finished one page, a lazy flick of his wand caused it to flip to the next without him ever actually touching it. He considered himself an avid reader with a keen interest in a great many subjects, magical and mundane. That was part of why he'd come to Hogwarts. True, he was quite looking forward to watching the progress in his research teams, observing as all the bright young minds he'd taken under his wing delved into magical



mysteries of all kinds, ranging from the Patronus to advanced ward design to refinement of the Polyjuice potion. Perhaps he'd even find out what in Merlin's name a *nargle* was. But he also had a secondary purpose in accepting this position: the unfettered access it gave him to the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library, one of the largest repositories of obscure and dangerous magic in all of Europe.

Lockhart yawned and glanced at the clock on the wall. He thought he'd best be off to bed now, as he'd have only six hours of sleep before the first day of his Physical Fitness class. He was rather looking forward to putting the Hogwarts students – well, those who weren't better suited for research work – through their paces. With another flick of his wand, the book closed itself and dropped onto the desk, emitting an angry snarl as it did. Lockhart glanced down at the cover in mild surprise.

It was, as one might expect, a picture of Gilderoy Lockhart, but one that looked far different than the wizard's normal appearance. His hair was not perfectly styled but instead rather bedraggled. His skin was pale and his cheeks sallow and sunken. His eyes seemed to blaze with a murderous hatred, and his "winning smile" was replaced with a feral snarl that suggested he wanted to leap out of the picture and maul anyone he could reach with his grasping, talon-like hands.

The DADA instructor shook his head and sighed in annoyance. From a drawer in the desk, he withdrew a pair of white silk gloves which he then donned. He glanced in the drawer as he did and was pleased to see that there was still a few dozen pairs of gloves inside. He'd probably need them all at this rate. Once protected, he carefully removed the dust jacket (and its moving picture of a crazed frothing

Gilderoy Lockhart) from the book before wadding the paper up and placing it into a lidded brass container on the desk. Then, he arose from the desk and crossed to the other side of the room where his trunk rested. From inside, he pulled a new dust jacket from the stack of them hidden inside, this one still depicting the face of the handsome and debonair Gilderoy Lockhart that he was accustomed to showing the world. Carefully, he wrapped the enchanted paper around the old leather-bound book, and while the new picture of Lockhart retained his normal appearance and genial mood, there was already the faintest hint of distress in his eyes and his award-winning smile immediately seemed the tiniest bit forced.

Having once more covered the library book with a false dust cover, Lockhart removed his gloves and dropped them into the brass jar where he had placed the previous dust jacket. Then, he waved his wand over the jar and whispered "**INCENDIO**." There was a burst of yellow flame, accompanied by an agonized squeal from the burning paper, as he slammed the lid down tightly. Lockhart shook his head in annoyance. The frequency with which he needed to replace the dust jacket due to magical corruption from the book within was becoming tedious, but he knew it was necessary. After all, he was Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin (Third Class) and Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League.

It simply wouldn't do for a wizard of his standing and reputation to be seen wandering around the school brazenly reading out of a book with a title as provocative as **Magick Moste Evile**.

# Pranks & Other Diversions, 1

## CHAPTER 20: Pranks and Other Diversions

***7 September 1992***

The potion turning lime-green was the first clue that something was amiss. The second clue was when it started screaming. Harry was partnered with Neville in Potions today, and he immediately noticed the problem and called out for Professor Snape just before the potion's agonized wailing started. Seemingly in response, Harry, Neville and everyone around them clutched their heads and began to sway as if overcome by vertigo. Luckily, before anyone passed out (or possibly died), Snape was close enough to cast a Silencing Charm on the cauldron which now had what appeared to be several mouths floating in the gooey green surface of the cauldron, all wailing in silent agony. Snape frowned at the contents of the cauldron and then banished it with a slash of his wand, along with the silencing spell. Then, he turned to Neville with an obviously annoyed expression.

"Your hands, Longbottom! Show them to me." A nervous Neville held out his hands, and Snape grabbed one and turned it over so that the palm was facing up. Then, he waved his wand silently, and the boy's hands turned the same vivid green as the vanished potion. The man sighed.

"Five points from Gryffindor. You will both sit quietly until the end of class. Longbottom, you will think long and hard about what *you* might have done to have earned that point loss. If you can come up with an explanation and a good excuse, I *might* let you off without an additional punishment."

After enduring a small amount of sniggering from Draco and his lackeys, the two somewhat dejected boys sat down until the end of class. Then, at Snape's summons, they relocated to the front row of class.

"Well," Snape asked.

Neville swallowed and glanced down at his hands which were still green. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't imagine what could have happened."

"Can't you?" he replied. "Well let me hazard a guess. By any chance were you assisting Professor Sprout with unpackaging the Mandrake seeds that arrived this morning? And were you perhaps foolish enough to not wear gloves while handling those seeds or to even wash your hands afterwards?"

Neville scrunched up his eyes in frustration. "Sorry sir. I *did* use gloves, but I was running late and didn't have a chance to do a full decontamination. Honestly, I never realized that I'd been contaminated." He looked down at his glowing hands. "Certainly not this much."

"Well, don't apologize to me about it, Longbottom. Apologize to your lab partner for whom you've just earned a zero for the day." The boy looked even more downcast, and Snape sighed. "Unless, of course, the two of you can find a time within the next week that also fits within *my* schedule to come in and brew that potion over again."

Harry nodded. "We'll compare schedules and let you know before the end of the day. Thank you, Professor."

"*However*, you're not getting off scot-free, Longbottom. By Monday, I want three feet of parchment from you on the importance of keeping yourself free of contaminants while

brewing potions, and another three feet on the reactive properties of the Mandrake plant. I must confess I am disappointed in you, Mr. Longbottom. If there was a single student in your Year who I would have expected to know about the dangers of even the slightest speck of Mandrake pollen introduced into a potion, it would have been you."

"Again, I am sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"See that it does not. In any case, since you are both here, there is another matter I wished to discuss with you two. Mr. Potter, you will no doubt recall some rather serious concerns you raised last May regarding the confrontation between the Other Potter and the Dark Lord. Specifically, your insinuation that the Headmaster might have deliberately engineered that confrontation. However, I will require a secrecy oath before I tell you anything more. Indeed, I am only offering to tell you anything *now* because you were both potential subjects of the Prophecy and I believe you are entitled to be kept aware of developments pertaining to it, but *only* if you can keep it a secret. Speaking of which, how is your Occlumency progressing, Potter?"

"I am confident that I'd be classified as a Second Level Occlumens. I anticipate reaching Third Level by the end of the school year."

"Excellent. And I see, Mr. Longbottom, that you now carry the protections of your Heir's Ring. Your oaths then, gentlemen?"

The two boys each swore a simple secrecy oath followed by a mumbled "*so mote it be*" that would prevent them both from ever deliberately revealing the contents of their current conversation with the Potions Master.

"Good. Now, I can reveal to you the results of my investigation." He took a deep breath. "It was all just a string of coincidences."

Harry and Neville stared at Snape as if waiting for him to say he was joking.

"That's ... an *awful lot* of coincidences, isn't it, sir?" said Harry.

"Even more than you realize, I suspect. Tell me, Mr. Longbottom. How *exactly* did you and your Gryffindor compatriots even discover the Cerberus in the first place?"

Neville quickly related the tale of Jim's abortive duel with Draco, how he and Hermione only accompanied Jim and Ron because they'd been locked out of their dorm, how they'd all ran from Filch and Mrs. Norris, and how Hermione got them inside with the Alohomora spell she'd picked up from an out-of-print book she'd acquired.

"In other words," said Snape, "the only reason the Other Potter *ever* learned of the Cerberus and the trapdoor it guarded was because Miss Granger accompanied him by complete happenstance and because she just happened to know how to unlock the door with a rare spell not a part of the First Year curriculum, again by complete happenstance. Honestly, do either of you really think that the Headmaster could have engineered such a sequence of events as part of any coherent plan? If you doubt me, then consider this. You may recall that during his announcements last year after the Sorting, the Headmaster specifically said that the Third Floor corridor was out of bounds for any students who did not wish to die a painful death."

Harry nodded. "Yes. I always thought it was odd for the Headmaster to draw so much attention to that corridor if he

wanted everyone to stay away from it. Looking back, I'm surprised the Weasley Twins didn't find Fluffy that night!"

"That, Mr. Potter, is because you are young and still ignorant of the more subtle warding techniques. When the Headmaster spoke those specific words, they served to trigger a memetic ward on the corridor in question. Any student who heard those words and who later *intentionally* tried to enter the Third Floor corridor would have been overwhelmed by an ever-increasing sense of impending certain death that would have driven away anyone not at least a fourth-level Occlumens or possessed of comparable protection. The only reason Mr. Longbottom, the Other Potter and the other two Gryffindors were able to overcome that ward and even approach the door was because they were *lost* at the time and didn't realize where they were. And you all were only able to return to that corridor for the final confrontation with Quirrell and the Dark Lord because Quirrell had secretly *deactivated* that particular ward earlier that afternoon precisely because he wanted all of you to join him in the Mirror Room."

Harry and Neville must have both looked astonished, because Snape shook his head before speaking again. "The truth, Mr. Potter, is that far from trying to engineer a confrontation between the Boy-Who-Lived and the Dark Lord, the Headmaster was attempting to ensure that such a confrontation *never happened*. The original plan was for the Mirror of Erised to be in place by September 1st with the expectation that Quirrell would attempt to steal the Philosopher's Stone sometime around Halloween. That plan was thwarted almost from the beginning by a series of increasingly improbable coincidences that eventually brought about the very confrontation the Headmaster sought to avoid."

Harry's eyes widened as he recalled the words of Countess Zabini. "Prophecies *want* to come true," he repeated aloud. "And they have the power to shape minor random events to help bring themselves to fulfillment."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter. The entire incident proved rather conclusively that the Prophecy cannot simply be subverted, or at least, not as easily and directly as the Headmaster had thought."

"Well, in that case," asked Neville. "Why are they trying to subvert it at all? I mean, Jim's pretty clearly the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. So why don't people focus on letting him do that?"

Snape actually winced at the Gryffindor's bluntness. "Questions like that, Longbottom, are why I swore you to an oath of secrecy before I said anything at all. Let me begin by saying that I still do not know the entire Prophecy. To my knowledge, no one does except for the Headmaster and both Lily and James Potter. However, note that the first line refers to '*the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord*' rather than simply '*the one who will vanquish the Dark Lord*.' I suspect that whatever hidden power is at the Other Potter's disposal, it is not one that guarantees his victory."

"So what's Plan B?" asked Harry as he considered the implications of what Snape had said. The man shrugged.

"I imagine that the Headmaster and the Potters are investigating stratagems for ensuring that any future confrontations take place under controlled circumstances that will give the Other Potter the best chance for victory. That is certainly what I would do in their position. Beyond that, I do not know. Lord Potter does not wish to allow me



any role in their strategizing, and I have no particular interest in forcing my way into their deliberations. " Snape paused. "Which segues into another related but more personal matter for you alone, Mr. Potter. Mr. Longbottom, will you excuse us?"

Neville looked at his friend who nodded silently. Then, he left the room.

"I had planned to contact you about this later," said Snape. "But now is as good a time as any. Your mother wishes to have lunch with you one day this week at your convenience."

Harry did a double-take. "Sorry? My mother does what now?"

Snape sniffed at Harry's lack of decorum. "Pursuant to the injunction which your solicitors put into place at your direction, your parents are forbidden to interact with you except when *I* am present. After the events of this past summer, your mother now wishes to try to get to know you and presumably seek some sort of rapprochement."

"Will my father be there?" asked Harry doubtfully.

"*Good Lord, No!* Your mother knows us all well enough to realize that putting you, your father and myself into an enclosed space is a recipe for disaster."

Harry thought that was probably an understatement.

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## ***9 September 1992***

On a bright sunny afternoon, Ginny, Tori and the rest of the Slytherin First Years made their way outside for their first

day of flying lessons. Following Harry's advice, Ginny had worked herself like mad to stay ahead of her class work. She'd won a total of six points in the last week which put her near the top of the Slytherin firsties, but she wasn't exactly dominating her Year academically the way Harry had the year before. Since their last encounter, she'd avoided Ron as much as possible, though he gave no outward sign of his former hostility. She'd also spent as much free time as she could with her other brothers. "*I wonder if Percy still has his notes from First Year,*" she thought to herself.

Once out on the pitch, she noticed that the Slytherins were paired with the Ravenclaws. She'd only met a few Eagles so far. Dequon Chang ("Deck" to his friends) was a extremely outgoing and genial Asian boy who was determined to embarrass his cousin Cho Chang at every opportunity. Saffron Brown was a bookish girl with curly brown hair and glasses who seemed resigned to living in the shadow of her older sister Lavender. Jacob Harrison was a Muggleborn from Liverpool who was still getting used to the whole "magic thing" as his father was a computer programmer and his mother a secondary school physics teacher. And of course, there was Marietta Edgecombe who was busy gossiping with Drusilla Crabbe, probably about her. While Crabbe was doing her best to act poised, Ginny thought she looked a bit queasy.

"Are you okay, Crabbe?" she asked.

Drusilla coughed. "I'll be ... fine, Weasley. After all, how hard can this be?"

"You should listen to Weasley's advice, Crabbe," said Niles Harper in a nasty voice. "She's probably used to flying on second hand brooms that fall apart all the time. I bet that's

all her brood can afford." Harper and Bletchley laughed at that until Madame Hooch blew her whistle.

"Alright, everyone," she said. "Everyone take your position next to a broom." She gave her usual instructions on how to call the broom into one's hand and instructed the class to try it. Tori yelled "UP!" a little *too* assertively, and her broom jumped up and bopped her in the nose. Ginny, who was just about to summon her own broom, stopped to see that her friend was alright.

"Better look after yourself first, Weasley," said Kevin Bletchley with a laugh. "Assuming you can even get your broom to listen to you."

Ginny said nothing. She just stared at the two Slytherin boys with obvious disdain. Then, without even looking down, she casually put her hand out and calmly said "Up" without even raising her voice. The broom flew up into her hand with a slap faster than any of the Slytherin boys had managed. "Anymore advice from the peanut gallery, Bletchley?" she asked mildly. The nasty grins faded from the boys faces to be replaced by looks of angry consternation.

A few minutes later, after everyone had managed to summon their broomsticks, Madame Hooch instructed the class on how to properly mount and hold the broom – stopping briefly to compliment Ginny on her perfect grip – before preparing them for their first take-offs. She blew her whistle, but immediately there was a commotion as Drusilla Crabbe suddenly shot up off the ground higher and higher until she took off into the air, screaming the whole way.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," exclaimed Madame Hooch, who suddenly was reminded of the Longbottom fiasco from the previous year. "Not this again!"

By this point, Drusilla was about sixty feet up in the air and screaming her head off when there was a blur of motion from the ground. Before anyone even knew what had happened, Ginny was up in the air facing the other girl with her hand firmly gripping the tip of Crabbe's broom which suddenly stabilized. "DRUSILLA! SHUT! UP!" Startled, the girl stopped screaming.

"Good!" said Ginny. "Now, keep your hands on your broom but *relax your grip*. Just barely hold on to keep yourself steady. And *just keep looking at me*." Drusilla swallowed and nodded, and the two brooms gradually started drifting back down to the ground in a gentle corkscrew motion. After a few seconds, they touched down, and to Ginny's surprise, a tearful Drusilla rushed forward and gave her a huge hug that nearly squeezed the life out of her.

The rest of the students crowded around the duo as Madame Hooch moved through the students. "Miss Crabbe, are you quite alright?" The girl nodded. "Miss Weasley, I would say that was very reckless of you if it weren't obvious that you were in complete control the whole time. Would you care to explain though what exactly you did up there?"

"Oh, well, from the way Miss Crabbe's broom took off, it looked to me like some of the dorsal bristles must be loose and that threw the vertical stabilizers off. But I realized that if I could grab hold of the tip of her broom with my offhand and get her to relax her grip enough, the brooms would sync up and I could pilot her down." She turned and looked innocently in the direction of Niles and Kevin. "It was obvious what to do if you're experienced enough with a broom."

Hooch chuckled and examined Crabbe's broomstick. "You're quite right. My apologies, Miss Crabbe. This broom

should never have been put out for student use. In fact, I wonder now if it's the same one poor Longbottom got last year." She turned back towards Ginny. "Well handled, Weasley. Can I assume that your brother Charlie has had an influence on you?"

Ginny gave what she intended to be a bashful smile. "Yes, Madame Hooch. He always made a point of making sure the family brooms were thoroughly rethatched every summer. When he couldn't get any of our brothers to help him, I volunteered. He taught me a lot ... when my parents weren't looking, that is."

Hooch laughed again. "Very good. Five points to Slytherin for quick thinking and deft broom-handling. Miss Crabbe, do you wish to go to the infirmary for a Calming Draught? I would not want you flying on this broom in any case." The girl nodded. "Weasley, since it's abundantly clear that you're past the beginner level, why don't you escort Miss Crabbe?"

Ginny nodded. As she led Drusilla away, she noticed that most of the students (including the Slytherin boys) were giving her slightly awestruck expressions. Tori was grinning from ear to ear and giving a thumbs-up gesture. Even Wilkes smiled approvingly and offered a "Nice job, Weasley" as she passed by. When they were away from the class, Ginny turned once more to Drusilla. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked.

Drusilla nodded. "I think so. And ... thank you ... *Ginny*." Ginny smiled at that. "Mind you, I'll probably still have to be somewhat horrible to you whenever Draco is around ... but thank you."

Ginny nodded. "It's alright. I'll try not to take it personally."

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### ***Later that night ...***

"I still don't know if this is a good idea," said the first Weasley.

"Look, we all agreed he deserves a little something for always slagging on the Slytherins even though he knows our sister's in there, right?" said the second Weasley. "Well, hopefully, this will make him think twice about it in the future. And it won't hurt anyone. It's completely harmless. Honestly, I bet he'll even get a laugh over it."

"I dunno," said the third Weasley. "You have to be careful about pulling pranks on a house-mate even if he deserves it. We all do have to sleep here, after all."

"That's the beauty of this," said the second Weasley. "He'll assume it was Harry or some other Slytherin. He'll never even realize it was us. Best case scenario: Jim learns to keep his mouth shut about Slytherins."

"And the worst case scenario?" asked the first Weasley, uneasily.

The second Weasley shrugged "Most likely, Jim and Harry get into a prank war between themselves, and we just get to sit back and watch."

The second and third Weasleys laughed at that, while the first remained pensive.

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### ***10 September 1992***

The presence of Neville Longbottom in the Potions room first thing in the morning when the boy did not have class

again for four days was the first clue that something was amiss. The look of obvious anger on the face of a boy known for serene unflappability was the second.

"Mr. Longbottom," drawled Snape. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm still working on your six feet of parchment due on Monday, sir. Fair is fair – I should have done a full decontamination just to be safe. *But* I thought you should know about this!" With that, the Gryffindor slapped a pair of heavy gardening gloves onto Snape's desk. The man crooked an eyebrow at his student who was acting remarkably out of character.

"I see a pair of gloves, Longbottom, the presence of which tells me nothing I don't already know."

"They're my Herbology gloves, sir. And someone has thoughtfully filled both of them with powdered dust from crushed Mandrake leaves. It was some idiot's idea of a joke, I'll wager, but one involving a dangerous ingredient that could have *killed* us if Harry and I had been working with a different potion last Monday."

"I see. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will make appropriate announcements in my classes regarding the dangers of using Mandrake for frivolous purposes. And in light of this, perhaps my earlier punishment was too hasty. Reduce your writing assignment to a foot and a half on each topic."

"If it's all the same, sir, I'd rather keep it at the original length. Somebody may have pranked me but that's no excuse for not washing up properly. As for the other, well, it's actually kind of interesting. I had *no idea* what all you can use Mandrakes for."

Snape snorted. "Gryffindors."

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### ***Later during lunch ...***

The weight on Jim's head was the first clue that something was amiss. The second clue was when the high-pitched singing started. Lunch was nearly over when Jim Potter bit into a treacle tart and immediately felt the sudden pressure on the top of his head. Hermione, Neville and Ron looked at him in amazement, while several other Gryffindors started to laugh, particularly after the singing started up in a thick Irish accent. Specifically, singing which emanated from the brilliant green and golden royal crown that had appeared on Jim's head, the one bearing the golden inscription "*Jim Potter, King of the Leprechauns*." And the song the crown produced – and which half the school would sing regularly for weeks to come whenever Jim came near – was set to the tune of "God Save the Queen" with lyrics as follows:

#### *King of the Leprechauns*

His brains are made of bronze  
He makes us sick.

#### *It's really obvious that*

Jim is a total prat  
Smart as a Beater's Bat  
and just as thick.

Jim snatched the crown off his head and examined the inscription, his face turning red as more people in the Great Hall looked in his direction and started laughing. The song was apparently on a loop, as it started up again immediately. Annoyed, Jim shook the crown repeatedly in an effort to get it to stop. Then, he cast a Silencing spell on it. That somehow caused the singing to *increase* in



volume. Finally, in frustration, Jim dropped the crown onto the floor underneath the table, hoping that would at least muffle the singing. Instead, as soon as it left his hands, the crown disappeared with a pop ... and then immediately reappeared on top of his head. This continued for several minutes, with Jim continually trying to dispose of the crown and it reappearing on top of his head and still singing its insipid tune. Finally, several Sixth and Seventh Year students (led by Percy Weasley) all cast *Finite* simultaneously on the crown while Jim held it in his hands, and that worked. But before the joke crown vanished, just for a second, Jim (and only Jim) could make out four small sparkling letters at the base of the crown: SRGD. And almost immediately, Jim knew what they stood for.

*"Slytherins Rule. Gryffindors Drool."*

At the sound of continual laughter all around him, the boy's face flushed in embarrassment. He looked up across the room to see if Harry was watching. He was, although the Slytherin actually had the *gall* to act surprised, as if he'd had nothing to do with the prank even though it practically bore his signature. Part of Jim wanted to walk across the room to confront his twin... and punch him in the jaw. Luckily, he was studying Occlumency now from the book his godfather had secretly gotten for him, and so Jim followed the advice the book gave for dealing with feelings of anger, embarrassment or unhappiness:

*"Take all those negative feelings and squish them down into a tiny ball deep in the pit of your stomach until you can freely unleash them all at once on your enemy."*

So Jim took that burning feeling of shame out of his cheeks and shoved it down into the pit of his stomach where it joined all the other little fires of anger, fear and

unhappiness that he'd been shoving down there since his twelfth birthday. And the fire grew just a little bit hotter.

# Pranks & Other Diversions, 2

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***CHAPTER 21: Pranks and Other Distractions (Pt. 2)***

***11 September 1992***

The presence of treacle tart on the table was the first clue that something was amiss. Jim was notorious for his obsessive love of treacle tart. Indeed, according to the rumor mill, whatever magical effect caused that "*King of the Leprechaun*" nonsense a few days prior was triggered by Jim biting into a slice of the desert which had been impregnated with some potion to link him to the enchanted crown. Harry, however, was more of a creme brulee fan, possibly due to fact that it required a blowtorch. And the plate of treacle tarts sitting between Lily Potter and himself was a subtle reminder that his mother knew next to nothing about him.

For about ten minutes, the two had made forced but polite chit-chat while Snape sat between them eating silently and psychically projecting to everyone on Earth his desire to be somewhere else. Harry was doing well in all his classes, but particularly DADA and Potions. Lily loved teaching Muggle Studies and was thrilled to have had the chance to update a class that was almost a century behind on Muggle politics and technology. Snape took another bite of chicken. Harry was looking forward to his first Quidditch match (he left out the fact that he was Chaser rather than Seeker). Since the number of students taking Muggle Studies was still rather low, Lily was spending her free time working with

Professors Flitwick and Vector with an eye towards eventually completing a Mastery in Charms, Arithmancy or both. Snape took a big sip of wine. With each overly polite exchange, Snape took another bite of food and chewed it a minimum of thirty times to reduce the likelihood that he might be caught without anything in his mouth and thus asked a question.

Finally, after a particularly uncomfortable lull, Harry opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and looked down at the table. "I'm sorry," he said hesitantly. "I just realized ... I'm not sure what to call you. Most Slytherins would say '*Mother*' but that seems awfully ... formal to me. And I'm not sure about '*Mum*' because ..." He stopped abruptly and looked towards Lily with an embarrassed expression.

"Because I haven't earned that title, perhaps?" she asked sadly. She took a deep breath. "Perhaps, then, until you feel comfortable calling me '*Mum*,' you could just call me Lily and your father James. That would be ... familiar, at least."

"Okay ... Lily ... at the risk of, I dunno, shattering the mood or something ... what made you decide to reach out to me. I mean, it's been six weeks since the birthday party and, well, you weren't very talkative then."

"I didn't know what to say. I still don't. I already knew at that point that someone had tried to kill you while you were living with Petunia. And I also knew at that point that the Dursleys themselves had mistreated you, although I still don't know all the details. You have every reason to hold that against me, and I don't have any defense that *I* would consider persuasive let alone one *you* should." At that, she gave a quick glance towards Snape. "And then, someone tried to kill you again at the party. That just ... brought everything from my school days back."

"What do you mean?" he asked, genuinely curious.

She hesitated and then reached into her bag and produced a framed picture of an older man and woman. "I wanted to give you this before you left today. This is Michael and Rose Evans. My parents, your grandparents. Please keep it. I have other copies." She paused as if to collect herself. "Your father and I got married late in the summer of 1979. We tried to keep everything low key, but James was Heir to an Ancient and Noble House, so naturally the Prophet eventually found out about the marriage and made a big story out of it ... and out of how James and I were somehow heroically defying You-Know-Who by getting married despite our different blood statuses. And ... the Death Eaters didn't like that, so they found out where I lived, broke in, and tortured your grandparents with the Cruciatus Curse for hours. Finally, they got bored and left ... after setting the house on fire with Mum and Dad trapped inside." She paused suddenly. "Did ... did Petunia ever mention any of this? Is that why she ...?"

*"Abused me?" thought Harry. "No. There was a totally different reason for that."* He shook his head. "No, she never talked about them or how they died. I doubt that had anything to do with it." He studied the picture of the grandparents who had died before he was born. As much as people said he looked like his father, he could also see traces of himself in Robert Evans. For one thing, his eyes were much closer to the intense green of his grandfather than the softer shade of his mother. *"If they'd lived, would Lily have sent me to them instead of Petunia? And would they have ended up treating me just the same?"*

Harry set the picture aside and looked into his mother's eyes. "Was that why you sent me away? Because you thought that I'd be killed if I stayed with the Potter family?"

"Yes," she said simply. "In light of recent events, can you blame me for that?"

"No, but I *can* blame you for not checking up on me for ten years. The Dursleys told me that you had *died*."

"The Dursleys..." She stopped, anger flashing over her face before being replaced by sadness again. "The Dursleys did a lot of things they weren't supposed to.

They *were* supposed to tell you that James and I had died in a car crash. Their ... *embellishments* about it being caused by James's drunk driving were *not* a part of the story. You were supposed to be raised by Petunia and Vernon with kindness, if not love, until you finished school. At that point, you would be given access to a sizeable trust fund that would provide a very comfortable standard of living for the rest of your life, enough for you to never work if that was your desire. And *of course*, all of that was conditional on you *actually being a squib*. Petunia was supposed to contact me *immediately* if you showed any signs of accidental magic, at which point we'd have revealed the truth to you and brought you back into wizarding society. She never did. Until your Hogwarts letter was generated, we never had any clue you were a wizard."

"I know. I understand all that. I'm guess I'm just struggling with the bit where me being a squib is an *excuse* for sending me away and letting me think I was an orphan."

She shrugged helplessly. "It seemed best to have a clean break. Even ignoring the dangers specific to our family, there was and is institutional bigotry towards squibs who remain within the wizarding world. If you'd stayed with us, you would have been completely home-schooled because wizarding law would not have allowed for a child from a wizarding home to go to a Muggle school. You would likely

have never even *seen* a child who wasn't a wizard or witch while you were with us. There's very little work for adult squibs in the wizarding world, but mainstreaming into the Muggle world when you were older would have been very difficult because there was no paper trail saying where you went to school or where you had lived, and you'd have been woefully ignorant of Muggle culture. And that's *before* we get into about the issues of Death Eaters who wanted revenge against Jim or the very real possibility that Jim might unintentionally drain you of your very life while defending himself some day. I mean, after Jim drove off You-Know-Who last June, you and he *both* were in comas for days. I know it *looks* like we were favoring Jim over you when we sent you away, but honestly? I made the decision that I'd rather have a live child who thought he was an orphan than a dead one I'd have to bury. I deeply regret everything that happened, Harry. But looking back and thinking about what I knew at the time, I still am not sure I made the wrong decision."

"*You* made the decision? Do you mean James was opposed?"

She nodded. "Yes. Dumbledore and I had to talk him into it. He was completely in denial over the medical reports saying you were a squib. Then again, considering how things worked out, maybe he saw something the rest of us all missed. But when Petunia never contacted us to let us know you had signs of magic, he came to accept it. And then, a few weeks before your eleventh birthday, Albus contacted us to let us know that there was a letter for you."

Harry nodded. "But then, I was Sorted. And that ... changed."

"Yes. I always knew that knew that James wasn't ... rational when it came to Slytherins." At that, Snape nearly choked

on a sip of wine and coughed violently for a few seconds. Lily smiled at him with what Harry thought was a surprising fondness. "Well, I say Slytherins but it was really just Slytherin students here at Hogwarts. I don't know if you knew this but your maternal grandmother, Dorea Black Potter, was in your house. She and your grandfather had a rather famous and occasionally violent feud when they were at school together but then got over their differences after graduation and eventually started courting. Still, from the way James tells it, even *she* was strongly opposed to the thought of him being Sorted into her old house. And of course, when James was in school, it was different because everyone knew that You-Know-Who was actively recruiting among Slytherin alumni. A lot of James's anti-Slytherin hostility was a response to some fairly overt bigotry that was commonplace within your house at that time."

Severus snorted softly at that. She sighed. "And yes, some of *that* was a response to bullying from a quartet of schoolboys who were allowed to run wild by their doting and overly-forgiving teachers. *That said*, Severus, you can't sit there and pretend the Slytherins were completely blameless. I do remember getting hexed pretty regularly by Rosier and Mulciber just for being a Muggleborn." She paused and then smiled almost mischievously.

"I *also* remember what you did to the Marauders at the start of Sixth Year. That prank with the raspberry tarts and Minerva McGonagall's sexy voice?"

To Harry's amazement, his normally emotionless Potions professor blushed slightly. And then ... he *smiled*, as if savoring one of his most favorite memories.

"What did you do to them?" Harry asked in quiet awe. Snape coughed and regained his composure.



"Nothing for you to know about, Potter," he said. "At least not until you're older."

Harry shook his head in bemusement. Then, he looked back towards Lily. "On the morning of my birthday party, James said he wanted to try to reconcile. Do you think he's serious about that?"

She paused as if considering the matter. "I ... don't know. He's told me that he is, but it's a rather abrupt change. And he's apparently willing to reconcile on the basis of a recommendation from Peter Pettigrew, and frankly, I've never trusted that man."

Harry nodded. "I appreciate you being forthright about that."

"Thank you." The two were silent for a few seconds. Snape quickly popped a bit of potato into his mouth and started chewing before anyone looked his way.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to change the subject to something a bit lighter. Normally, I'm opposed to pranks, but I *do* appreciate good spellwork. How in Merlin's name did you get that singing crown spell to work on Jim the other day?"

Harry's eyes shot up in surprise. "I don't know whether to be offended or flattered, but that wasn't me. Although I agree it was impressive spellwork."

"Really? Jim seems convinced it was you. He says you practically signed your name to it."

"Hmmp. Well, that only proves it *wasn't me*. A real Slytherin would never sign his name to a prank. We'd sign someone else's name to frame them for our misdeeds."

"Ha-ha. I've no doubt. Although whoever it was, I hope they don't make a habit of mocking Jim over those books. He's embarrassed by them enough as it is."

"Then why keep printing them? I know the story behind them. And I know you could stop publication of them tomorrow if you wanted."

She sighed with resigned expression. "James and Jim both would be thrilled if that happened, but that's another area where I made sure to have my way. I decided very early on that Jim's public image was something that we would have to zealously protect and control. The books help with that."

"I don't understand," Harry said in confusion. "Jim's the Boy-Who-Lived. People *bow* when he walks by. What sort of protections do you think he needs?"

"You'd be surprised." She hesitated. "Harry, the wizarding world as a whole is very ... credulous. And also very fickle. When Jim was a baby and everyone found out what he'd done, there were people who thought he was some sort of Wizarding Messiah." Her expression hardened. "But there were also other views. Views spread by people who thought that if Jim could destroy You-Know-Who as a baby, it must mean that he was destined to someday become a greater Dark Lord than You-Know-Who himself. In those first years, there were followers of You-Know-Who who wanted to kill Jim for revenge, but there were others who wanted to kidnap him instead and ... raise him properly '*according to Pureblood values*.' And there were even a few on the Light side who thought it might be in everyone's best interest if the government took him into protective custody to protect him from *bad influences*."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Really?! There are people out there who actually think Jim is ... Dark Lord material?"

"Not as many today as there were in 1983, but probably still a few. Jim told me that Draco Malfoy made an abortive attempt to befriend him on the train to Hogwarts last year. I suspect it was because Lucius Malfoy was sounding Jim out to find out what he was actually like as a person."

"I was there. It was an ... odd interaction, now that I think about it. And the books?"

She shrugged and smiled. "After we won the court case, we discovered how popular those books were, and I decided that it was a good way to shape public opinion in Jim's favor. Today, all that most wizards and witches know about Jim is that he raises lots of money for charity and that he appears in children's books as an earnest, heroic young man who stands steadfast against the forces of evil."

"Okay, but why the *Hardy Boys*?"

She smiled almost sheepishly. "Nostalgia? When I was a girl, I used to have the biggest crush on Shaun Cassidy." Harry stared at her in confusion, and she smiled. "Sorry, let's just say that I was a Muggleborn who came of age in the 1970's and it left its mark on me."

Harry chuckled and then looked down at his watch. "Ooo, I need to run. I've got Transfiguration in ten minutes." He paused and looked back up at his mother. "I've ... enjoyed this. I, uh, wouldn't mind doing it again ... if you want." Then, he glanced over at Snape. "We may need to wait a week or two to give Professor Snape a chance to recover."

Snape glared at him through hooded eyes that promised dreadful detentions in the future. Lily just smiled. "I'd like

that."

Harry nodded and left the room.

"I must confess," said Snape after the door closed, "that went *much* better than I'd expected. You were wise to pursue a general policy of total honesty. That said, I warn you now: If you ever suggest that your husband *joinus* in future bonding sessions, I'll put poison in your afternoon tea."

She laughed. "If I ever propose something that crazy, Severus, I hope I *drink* it."

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### ***Later that afternoon ...***

As he made his way back to his dorm, Harry thought back to his luncheon with Lily. He didn't think he'd forgiven her for abandoning him to the Dursleys so completely. Certainly not now, and possibly not ever. However, two thoughts gave him pause. The pragmatic one was that Lily at least seemed to want a genuine reconciliation with him, whereas James's attitude about that seemed much more suspect. If Lily was a potential ally in any future conflict against James, it would be foolish to spurn her out of bitterness over his upbringing with the Dursleys. It was the second thought that Harry found more troubling, so much so that he found it difficult to articulate beyond thinking: "*what if she was right?*" If Lily had spoken truthfully and had genuinely believed him to be the squib son of Lord Potter and the squib brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, then it was perfectly reasonable and arguably *compassionate* for her to have arranged for him to be raised as a Muggle. And while he still thought she should have checked in from time to time, Harry also realized that Lily could not have anticipated Harry's strange affliction

that made Muggles hate him, the affliction that ultimately drove Vernon Dursley to homicidal madness. Had it not been for that little quirk, might he have grown up in relative happiness with guardians who could at least feign affection towards him? And if he had been a squib, would it not have been *better* to have never known about magic at all than to have wondered "*what if?*"

Harry's thoughts were suddenly broken up as he rounded the corner near the Slytherin entryway to face of a new bit of weirdness: Titus Mitchell and Miranda Bonneville, the Sixth Year Slytherin Prefects, standing outside the entrance to their House's dormitory with giant translucent bubbles around their heads. As Harry moved towards the entrance, Titus put out a hand to stop him.

"Hold it, Potter. Some tossers – and by tossers, I mean most likely the Weasley Terrors – have been sneaking dungbombs into the bookbags of Slytherin students. So no one goes in until we've checked you out. Then, we'll cast the Bubblehead Charm on you so you don't vomit all over the Common Room floor and make the stink even worse. Now, hands out and arms up."

Bemused, Harry did as he was told. "***SCRUTIMINIUS DUNGBOMB***," the prefect intoned. Then, to Harry's surprise, the other boy's wand lit up and gave a soft humming sound. The hum slowly rose in pitch as Titus slowly moved his wand around until it came to rest against Harry's book bag.

"Okay, Potter. Stay very still." Harry froze as Mitchell carefully opened up Harry's book bag and then gently removed the prank explosive. Then, he carefully twisted the top and cast a Finite on it before visibly relaxing. There was a piece of paper wrapped around the dungbomb which he

removed before tossing the device into a metal can next to the door. From the clang, it sounded like there were several other deactivated dungbombs inside. He held the paper out to Harry. It contained just four letters: G-R-S-D.

"G-R-S-D. Just like all the rest. Any clue what it means, Potter?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "George and Ron Send Dungbombs? Although this really seems more like Fred's thing than either of them, I think."

"Whatever. If you get any better ideas than that, let one of the prefects know. Now hold still." Harry again did as he was told as the prefect cast the Bubble-Head Charm on him and then allowed him into the Slytherin Common Room. The scene was oddly surrealistic, as the dozen or so Slytherins in the Common Room all had large bubbles around their heads and were attempting to carry on as normal even as Marcus and Missy walked around the room casting air-purifying spells to cancel out the bombs that had gone off earlier. In the center of the room, Harry noticed that Draco and several members of his circle were facing off against Ginny, Amy Wilkes and Astoria Greengrass, with Theo and Blaise standing nearby, ready to intervene if necessary.

"I still say this *STENCH* came from the Weasley Terrors!" Draco said in a tinny muffled voice. "And that means *YOU* probably had something to do with it!"

"Don't be such an *idiot*, Malfoy!" Ginny replied in the same oddly distorted voice. "One of those dungbombs went off in *my* bag! The Twins might prank Slytherin House, but they wouldn't use me to do it! And I certainly wouldn't prank my own house where I sleep at night!"

"A likely story! I don't believe *ANYTHING* a *WEASLEY* has to say about anything! Who *KNOWS* what demented ideas are going on in your *STUPID WEASEL HEAD!*"

Biting down on the urge to laugh at "*Stupid Weasel Head*," Harry strode over to the group. "Draco, calm down!"

"DON'T TELL ME TO CALM DOWN JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE ON *HER SIDE!*"

"Draco," Harry replied calmly. "I'm not on *anybody's* side. I just want you to calm down because all your shouting is about to burst your bubble."

At that, Draco looked around and tentatively reached up to feel the bubble of clean air around his head. It had indeed increased over a foot in diameter due to his shouting. With obvious difficulty, he calmed down and the bubble began to shrink back to its normal size.

"Now, while Draco's deflating, someone else calmly tell me what all's been going on."

Blaise stepped forward. "About an hour ago, Miss Wilkes here entered the Common Room and a few minutes later, a dungbomb that had been hidden on her person went off. Immediately, several students became violently ill. Luckily, some of the older students were on hand to cast Bubble Head Charms and begin purifying the Common Room, a process that is close to wrapping up. A few minutes later, Miss Weasley entered and a dungbomb that had been hidden in her bag nearly detonated. However, she recognized the sound that a dungbomb makes before it goes off, threw her book bag into an empty corner, and alerted Marcus who put a shield up over it."

Harry nodded. "Well done, Miss Weasley."

"Hah!" exclaimed Pansy Parkinson. "I'll bet she brought a live dungbomb into the dungeon on purpose just so she could make a big show of warning people about it in order to curry favor with everyone!"

"*That's...*" Ginny paused mid-retort. "That's actually something that would have been totally clever and cunning if I *had* done it ... which I didn't. So... thanks for the compliment, I guess?"

"Oh, shut up, Weasel!" barked Draco. Ginny narrowed her eyes and stared intently at the tip of Draco's nose until he grew uncomfortable. "What are you looking at?"

"Your nostrils are very small. I was trying to decide if a Bat-Bogie Hex would actually injure you seriously."

"Why you ...!" Draco started fumbling for his wand, and Ginny did the same. Luckily, before Harry had to intervene, Amy Wilkes, who had apparently palmed her wand some time earlier, raised it towards Draco.

"We've been standing around like idiots with giant bubbles on our heads for the last half-hour," she said in a bored voice. "Can we please not make things even more ridiculous with a duel here in the Common Room? With our luck, someone will shoot off a fire spell and *ignite* all the fumes from the dungbombs."

"Joining sides with the blood traitor, Amaryllis?" said Pansy in a snide voice. "Especially that one? *That's* a surprise."

"What can I say, *Pansy*. I'm a *Wilkes* and we're all *craaaazy*, as I've heard you sniping behind my back for the last two weeks. Who *knows* what sort of horrible curses I can cast just because of my evil family tree?"



At that point, Marcus came over near the group and cast a detection spell of some kind. Then, he braced himself, used his wand to stab his bubble (which popped loudly), and inhaled. Satisfied, he exhaled and addressed the room.

"Right. The room's cleared of dung-stench, so everyone can pop your bubbles." He paused. "In retrospect, I should have said that in some way that sounded less stupid. And for *Merlin's sake*, keep an eye on your bags and backpacks until we find out what wanker has been responsible for all this and string him up from his goolies, got it?"

With that, he turned towards the group of First and Second Years, shook his head, and then turned to Harry. "I'll leave this lot to you. I'm not in the mood to deal with ... *pre-adolescent drama*." Then, he turned and stalked off leaving the group behind. With a laugh, Harry stabbed the bubble around his own head with his wand, and soon after, there were other loud pops all around the Common Room.

"Right," said Harry, "without getting drawn into '*pre-adolescent drama*' myself, let me just say this. I am quite certain that Miss Weasley had nothing to do with this nonsense. And I'm pretty confident that the Weasley Twins had nothing to do with it either."

"Then who was it?" asked Draco angrily.

"Personally, I suspect the Git-Who-Lived. The prank was juvenile, low brow, and most importantly, could only have been pulled off in the manner we've seen by someone with an invisibility cloak. As for motive, I am reliably informed that my brother thinks that I'm responsible for that '*King of the Leprechauns*' nonsense from the other day, and this was his feeble attempt at revenge."

"Wait, that wasn't you?" asked Drusilla Crabbe in confusion.

He gave her a pitying look. "Do you *see* huge banners hung all over the Common Room proclaiming that I reduced Jim Potter to sputtering rage in front of the entire school? People are *still* humming that tune whenever Jim is around. I *wish* that I could legitimately take credit for it, and the only reason I haven't *pretended* to be responsible is because I'm cautious about stealing the thunder of whoever actually did it until I know who they are."

With that, Harry glanced over at Theo and gave him a *significant look*. Theo smirked and nodded slightly while patting his own book bag meaningfully.

"But enough about pranks and other such nonsense. Let's move on to the more interesting question of why you two," he pointed at Ginny and Draco, "are so eager to start a rumble here in the Common Room."

"Because he's pompous, bigoted, obnoxious tit," spat Ginny.

"Because she's ..." Draco struggled to find any words he could say without contravening his Vow. "A *Weasley!*"

"Actually," said Harry with a smug expression, "it's because you're both under a spell."

"*WHAT?!*" Ginny and Draco said simultaneously. Then, they both looked at each other angrily.

Harry sat down in an overstuffed chair and regarded the two Slytherins and their respective tribes. "Mr. Nott, your report please?"

By that point, Theo had pulled several pages of parchment from his bag and was sorting through them. Then, he coughed loudly and began to speak.

"Prior to the events of 1788, the Noble House of Weasley and the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy had been in a general state of de facto alliance for more than 100 years. While the House of Weasley never formally swore fealty to the House of Malfoy, the two families had several joint business ventures and supported one another politically in the Wizengamot. It was widely understood that the House of Malfoy would support the elevation of the Weasleys to the status of Ancient and Noble House as soon as one of those seats became vacant."

Ginny and Draco stared at Theo in utter confusion while Harry just smiled. Theo continued.

"This state of affairs continued until 1788, when the Heads of the two Houses – Hephaestus Malfoy (Hufflepuff, Class of 1750) and Barnabas Weasley (Slytherin, Class of 1753) – decided to formalize their alliance with a marriage contract between Meleager, the Malfoy Heir, and Camilla, the eldest daughter of Barnabas. However, problems arose when Meleager, in a serious breach of etiquette, rather loudly let it be known that he was less interested in Camilla, who was six years his senior, than in Ludmilla Weasley, who was only one year his junior and who was considered to be more attractive than her older sister."

Ginny's eyes widened at the mention of Ludmilla Weasley, who Ron had mentioned during their confrontation as being the last female Weasley prior to her. Draco was equally surprised at the reference to Hephaestus Malfoy and his Heir, Meleager. He knew his own family tree quite well and recalled that Hephaestus was succeeded by Corvus Malfoy, whose unidentified older brother had been blasted off the family tree for unknown reasons.

"After his initial protests, Meleager bowed to his father's wishes ... at first. But then, only a week before the wedding, Meleager disappeared never to be seen again, along with Ludmilla, the bride price, the dowery, and all the wedding gifts that had been received up to that point. Each family blamed the other for the scandal. Barnabas Weasley called Meleager a rake who had seduced his baby girl, while Hephaestus called Ludmilla a slattern who had deceived his beloved son perhaps to his death. The situation deteriorated quickly, with three duels between members of the two houses over the course of the next year. Things came to a head in 1790 when Barnabas Weasley publicly accused Livilla Malfoy, Hephaestus's wife, of cursing the Weasley family with a *redacted* spell."

"A what?" exclaimed Draco. "What's a *redacted* spell?"

"Something very bad, apparently, because *all* of the written accounts from that era *literally* have the name of the spell blacked out. But whatever it was, Livilla would have been cast through the Veil of Death rather than just imprisoned in Azkaban if the charges had been proven. However, the burden of proof was on the Weasleys, and Barnabas was unable to secure a conviction in the Wizengamot. After Livilla was acquitted, the Malfoys turned around and sued the Weasleys for libel and slander, and the damages awarded to them over a false allegation of using a *redacted* spell caused the Weasleys to lose their Wizengamot seat. Most of the financial difficulties the Weasleys have had over the last two centuries stem from these events."

At that, Draco sneered at Ginny who stuck her tongue out at him.

"Anyway, having lost the court case, Barnabas Weasley exercised his power as Head of House to declare *family enmity* against the Malfoys, and Hephaestus Malfoy reciprocated."

"What does *that* mean?" asked Ginny.

Harry took over. "It means, Miss Weasley, that for nearly two hundred years, every Weasley born into your family has instinctively hated all Malfoys on sight, and every Malfoy born during that period has hated all Weasleys for the same reason. In other words, your mutual hostility is not *natural*. It's a magical effect that continues to plague both your families to this day, even though you've probably *all forgotten* the original reason for it."

"So how do they get rid of it?" asked Astoria.

"House enmity can only be ended by mutual agreement of the current Heads of the affected Houses," answered Theo authoritatively.

"Which hardly seems likely since our fathers can't get within ten feet without getting into fistfights," said Ginny.

"Why are you so interested in this anyway, Potter?" asked Draco in annoyance.

"Two reasons. First, I was curious about why you had such an extreme aversion to Ron on the train last year when you'd never met him before then, and later why your father had such an extreme and *public* altercation with Mr. Weasley. Second, I ... well, let's just say I disapprove of mind-altering compulsion spells. The idea of magic that's been thoughtlessly applied forcing one person to hate another without even realizing why ... offends me."

"You make it sound like you plan to do something about it," said Ginny suspiciously.

He shrugged. "In the short term, all I plan to do is ask you two to act like any responsible young witches and wizards. You know your feelings are unnatural. So even if you can't stop feeling the way you do, you *can* control how you respond publicly to those feelings. Don't allow yourselves to be overcome by external compulsions. And above all, don't embarrass Slytherin House over some ancient feud that has no relevance for either one of you."

"And in the long term?" asked Draco, just as suspiciously as Ginny was earlier.

"Well," said Harry with a cheerful grin. "If my short term solution fails, then I suppose I'll just have to make it a project of mine to bring your two warring families together in a spirit of peace and harmony. And you both know how I love my projects."

At that, Draco and Ginny, who both had experience with the byzantine and anarchic mind of Harry Potter, paled considerably.

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Every now and then, someone points a contradiction between this fic and something on Pottermore. I regret to say that I just don't have enough hours in the day to keep up with Pottermore and check everything I write against it. I use the Harry Potter Wikia for my fact-checking, and if it cites to something interesting from Pottermore, I might use it (and if so, I'll cite to it in an AN). But otherwise, while Pottermore is the canon, it isn't my canon, and if my facts differ from JKR's about some detail outside the books or movies,

please just roll with it. Case in point: James's grandfather is Charlus not Fleamont. I had already used Charlus before the Potter family history was posted by JKR, but even if I hadn't, I don't think I could bring myself to use that name. Also, the Potters did not make their fortune in potions and certainly didn't invent Sleekeazy, seeing as how the "famously unruly hair of the Potter men" is an identifying mark from the books.

AN 2: Undoubtedly, some people will think I'm going too easy on Lily and may be angry that it looks like Harry is forgiving her too easily. Stay tuned. This is a tentative first step, one chapter in a seven-volume series, and there will be a long way to go, if ever, before Harry ever calls Lily "Mum."

# **The Boggart (Pt 1)**

## **CHAPTER 22: The Boggart (Pt 1)**

***25 September 1992***

***7:00 p.m.***

Since the Day of the Dungbombs, there had been no further pranks attempted against Slytherin House. Harry contemplated some sort of revenge prank against Jim, but he decided against it for two reasons. First, he wasn't *completely* sure that it had been Jim's prank. Second (and more importantly in Harry's mind), he'd considered the dungbomb prank to be so juvenile as to be unworthy of a response. Certainly, he didn't see the need to be drawn into a prank war with the Git-Who-Lived over it. Apparently, however, someone in his House felt differently because a few days after the dungbomb episode both the Git and the Weasel had shown up for breakfast in particularly foul moods and sporting emerald green hair with silver highlights. It seemed that someone had reverse-engineered the prank that the Twins had tried to use on Harry the year before. Or perhaps the Twins themselves had gotten annoyed with Jim and Ron over something and did it themselves. Harry made a mental note to ask one of them whenever he remembered to care about his brother.

That night, right after dinner, Harry and the members of Team Protector met in the main DADA classroom for their first boggart encounter. Professor Lockhart spent the first thirty minutes explaining once again what a boggart was, how it had the ability to disguise itself as whatever the nearest viewer feared most, and how the Boggart-Banishing spell could repel it by forcing it to assume an



amusing form rather than a terrifying one. The trick was knowing what your biggest fear was, having an idea for how to make that fear into something funny, and being fast enough to do so before you fell completely under the boggart's sway. At the best of times, boggart exposure was often embarrassing, but if one's greatest fear stemmed from an actual traumatic event, the boggart could often force its victim to relieve the experience *and* the attendant trauma. The actual boggart they would be using was currently in a heavy trunk sitting against the back wall of the classroom.

"Right then," said Lockhart amiably. "I've watched you all demonstrate the Boggart-Banishing spell to my satisfaction. You all have the wandwork and incantation down. The only question now is whether you can demonstrate both while maintaining the required mental framework. Now, you may have noticed that there were a number of chairs out in the hall. I'll ask you all to step outside and wait until I call you in. I have prepared you all to face your boggart-fears as much as possible short of direct exposure. However, some of you may still find the experience disturbing, possibly even traumatic, especially if your greatest fear turns out to be something other than what you were expecting and you are unable to use the defensive charm properly. In any case, it would be the height of irresponsibility for me to let any of you face a boggart untested with all your classmates watching, to say nothing of a breach of your privacy and trust. Mr. Flint, you're first. Everyone else, outside."

With that, the other team members stepped out into the corridor. The group was pensive and mostly quiet, other than a few nervous Hufflepuffs who were urgently practicing the Boggart-Banishing spell. Harry and Neville sat next to each other off to one side.

"So," whispered Neville, "what do you think your *biggest fear* is?"

Harry shrugged in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner. "I'm assuming it's doxies. Or my uncle. Or my uncle *and* doxies. Or maybe Voldemort trying to strangle me." He paused thoughtfully. "It's kind of disturbing, now that I think of it, that You-Know-Who is only *fourth* on my list. You?"

"I'm still not sure. I know it'll have something to do with Uncle Algie, but I still don't know what exactly. A year ago, I'd have thought it was drowning, but I think I'm over that, so I really have no idea." He furrowed his brow. "It's entirely possible that my greatest fear is a plate of Cousin Enid's meringues."

After about five minutes, Marcus came out looking visibly shaken with a half-eaten bar of chocolate in his hand. He sat down next to Harry wearily.

"Don't. Ask." he said irritably before the two boys could speak. Then, he finished his chocolate while staring straight ahead at the wall. Harry and Neville just looked at each other nervously. One by one, the other team members were called in next and came back out just as shaken and disturbed before finally it was Neville's turn. To Harry's surprise, his friend was in and out in under a minute, and while he came out holding an uneaten piece of chocolate, he seemed thoughtful rather than upset as most of the team members had been so far.

"You okay?" Harry asked.

"Huh? Oh yeah, surprisingly fine. It was confusing at first, but not all that scary once I figured out what was going on." Then, he turned towards Marcus, who was still looking a

little peaky. "You want my chocolate?" he asked. Marcus numbly took the candy bar while looking stunned at how serene the young boy was.

"Um, Nev?" asked Harry. "So what was it? I mean, if you don't mind telling me."

"Oh, not at all. It was a giant piece of flagstone pavement flying towards me ready to bash my head in. Then, I realized that it wasn't really flying towards me. That was just how the boggart interpreted my uncle dropping me to my death. Once I realized that, I just cast the spell and it turned into bouncy rubber and that was that."

"That ... was that," Harry repeated before he broke out into a grin. "Don't ever change, Nev."

On the other side of him, a dumbstruck Flint just shook his head. "Gryffindors," he mumbled through a mouth full of chocolate.

Finally, it was Harry's turn. He took a deep breath and entered the classroom which was empty except for Lockhart, who sat in a chair off to the side behind a small writing desk, and the trunk, which was in the middle of the floor. There was a stack of chocolate bars on Lockhart's desk.

"Alright, Mr. Potter. Do you feel confident that you know your fear? And how to transform it into something amusing?" Harry answered yes to both questions. "Very good. Now draw your wand, move to within a few feet of the trunk, and nod when you're ready for me to open it."

Harry stepped forward wand in hand and nodded. "**ABIERTO**," intoned the Professor. The trunk's lid popped open, and a strange mist-that-wasn't-a-mist billowed out

and quickly took a solid shape. Harry wasn't surprised to see that his boggart looked like Vernon. He wasn't even surprised to see that the Vernon of his nightmares was bigger than normal, a bloated eight-foot-tall monstrosity. The thing for which Harry was completely unprepared, however, was *Vernon's smile*. That smile that was always in his nightmares but that he never liked to think about because it represented how much *joy* Vernon took from trying to kill him in one of the most painful ways known to wizard-kind. And then, *Smiling Vernon* opened his mouth to bellow what he always bellowed at Harry right before he woke up from his *nightmares* and Harry felt his arm moving in the familiar pattern of the banishing charm and from somewhere far away Harry heard a voice very much like his own yell out the word ***RIDDIKULUS!*** with a voice full of *terror and rage* and...

Harry shook his head as the boggart's effects faded. Smiling Vernon didn't bellow anything. Instead, he made a sort of farting sound, like air escaping from a balloon. And just like a balloon, Smiling Vernon suddenly turned into a Giant Inflatable Vernon that flew around in the air as it deflated before landing back in its trunk. The lid of the trunk slammed itself shut, and Harry was alone with the Professor. Suddenly aware once again of where he was, Harry turned slowly towards Lockhart who now stood a few feet behind him with an unreadable expression. He held out a candy bar in one hand, but Harry noticed that his wand was in the other, presumably in case the boy faltered. Harry took the chocolate and tore a big bite out of it as his heart rate returned to normal.

"You did exceptionally well, Mr. Potter. One of the best responses in the class."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said shakily as he put his wand away.

With that, Lockhart left Harry behind to call the other students back into the room. The group reentered with varying degrees of trepidation, and Lockhart began conjuring seats for all of them. "Mr. Flint, we're done with the boggart for this evening. Kindly assist Mr. Potter with putting it back in the closet well away the other students. Normally, boggarts will remain hidden away unless exposed, but sometimes the sound of a crowd nearby makes them frisky, *ha-Ha!*"

Marcus flinched slightly at Lockhart's laugh, before moving over to help Harry with the heavy trunk. They were nearly to the closet when it happened. From the far corner of the room, seemingly out of empty space, a voice called out "***ABIERTO!***" and the lid of the trunk flew open. The strange mist flew out again, and suddenly, towering over Flint was a hideous crone with pallid skin, milky-white eyes, and grasping talon-like hands. She wore a filthy nightdress and was bald save for a few wisps of hair.

"*MARCUS!*" she screamed in a voice like broken glass.  
"*WHERE'S MY TEA?! DO Y'WANT GRANNY TO GET THE BELT?! BRING ME MY TEA!*"

With a startled cry, Marcus dropped his end of the trunk and pulled back in sudden terror. The weight of the trunk landed on Harry's foot and he yelped in pain and fell down. The instant Marcus had moved far enough away, the boggart instantly turned towards Harry, and its form shifted like smoke. In place of Marcus Flint's senile cackling grandmother was Smiling Vernon once again, bigger than ever and now towering over the fallen Harry. The boy tried to pop out his wand, but it slipped out of its holster through fear-numbed fingers and fell to the floor. Vernon's smile grew wider until the corner of his lips reached his ears, and then he drew in a deep breath and bellowed out ...

**"SUPPERTIME!"**

And with that, Smiling Vernon ***ripped open his own chest*** to unleash the swarm of doxies inside, the swarm that promptly fell on the screaming Harry Potter. Several of the students cried out in utter horror at the scene – a half-dozen doxies was usually considered reason enough to contact the Ministry for a Hazardous Creature Control unit. A score of them crawling over a single target was unthinkable. While the rest of the class was distracted, Emily Rossum, who was the last one to reenter, was knocked aside by some invisible force that yanked the door open and then closed it just as quickly. Up front, both Neville and Lockhart rushed forward to help Harry. Lockhart was just a bit faster, and with a slash of his wand, Harry was yanked away from the boggart's chest and caught by his young Gryffindor friend. As Neville tended to Harry, Lockhart waved his arms wildly in an attempt to draw the boggart's attention away from Harry.

He succeeded.

The boggart's form blurred again as all of the doxies that had been attacking Harry suddenly coalesced into a new and even more terrifying form. Looming over Professor Lockhart stood a ten-foot-tall lupine figure with jet black fur, teeth the size of daggers, and eyes of purest amber. None of the students had ever seen such a creature in the flesh before, but all of them knew instantly what it was: *a werewolf*. The nightmare creature threw back its head and gave an unearthly howl, and most of the students screamed in absolute terror. But from his vantage point, Neville was the only one who could see Lockhart's face, a face that showed true fear for just a second before it was replaced by a different emotion: *hate*.

With a feral snarl, he thrust his wand towards the false werewolf. "**AVAD...!**" He growled out two syllables of a spell that only Neville was close enough to hear before he caught himself. Then, he slashed a different spell with his wand. "**RIDDIKULUS!**" he bellowed in a fury. There was a flash, and the werewolf instantly shrank down into the size of a terrified Chihuahua that turned tail and bolted back into the trunk which immediately slammed shut. But if Lockhart found anything amusing in the boggart's retreat, it didn't show. He whirled around to face the class, still enraged.

"*Who cast that spell?! Who unleashed that BOGGART?!*" The whole class froze, suddenly almost as frightened of their teacher as they had been of the werewolf.

"Whoever it was is gone, sir," said Emily. "There was someone standing over there in the corner invisibly. They knocked me down and ran out the door."

"Jim Potter's got an invisibility cloak," said Neville, who was still cradling a shivering Harry Potter. His voice was ice-cold, startling those in the room who knew him as perhaps the most affable student in the whole school.

With obvious difficulty, Lockhart brought himself back under control. "Students, I ... apologize for this ... unpleasantness. While I had hoped to spend some time discussing the implications of the Boggart-Banishing Charm for our larger efforts, I think it best that we call it a night. We will reconvene at a future date that will be posted tomorrow. Mr. Longbottom, please help Mr. Potter to the infirmary. I will assist Mr. Flint."

"I ... don't need ... infirmary," said the still shivering Flint.

Lockhart quickly knelt next to the prefect and spoke in a quiet tone. "I realize that, Mr. Flint, but I don't wish Mr. Potter to feel the embarrassment of being the only one affected. Do you?"

Marcus looked up at the instructor. He wasn't sure he believed the man, but he knew a face-saving offer when he saw one. He took a deep breath and spoke more loudly. "I'll go to the infirmary if you insist, sir, but I don't need any help walking."

"Of course not, Mr. Flint. I didn't mean to imply otherwise." With that, he extended a hand to the young man and helped him to his feet. As everyone exited the class, Lockhart also caught up with Emily and whispered something in her ear. She nodded and ran on ahead of the rest of the group.

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### ***Meanwhile in the Gryffindor Common Room ...***

Hermione Granger put down her quill and started rubbing her temples, acutely aware that she was doing the same thing Harry Potter did whenever *he* was confronted by something exasperating. Luna Lovegood sat on the couch next to her, placidly waiting for the other witch to regain control of the flurry of nargles which had risen up in a boojacentric flight pattern and were threatening to awaken the fury-flies and the teeth-gnashers. She didn't say any of that, of course, as she'd noticed that Hermione's wrackspurts became agitated whenever she mentioned any of the other things she perceived fluttering about inside and outside the other girl's head. Luna was actually very fond of Hermione, who normally did an admirable job of keep her wrackspurts under control, even if by doing so it forced her nargles to float rather listlessly while maintaining a particularly bland shade of beige.



For her part, Hermione was now sure that at least *some* of Luna's claims were true – there were too many instances in which she could intuit things about other people's inner moods with just a glance. The trouble was figuring out the patterns for her accurate perceptions while filtering out the concepts that were probably *not* true. In particular, Hermione's mind absolutely recoiled from acknowledging the existence of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. The most frustrating thing about her work with Team Mysterioso was that out of the four members, Ginny was in Slytherin and Penelope Clearwater was in Ravenclaw. That meant it fell to Hermione to spend her time observing her housemate Luna for insights into the things she claimed to see. The four of them met twice a week to go over her notes and look for patterns, but the actual observational work mainly fell to her.

Suddenly, Jim Potter came into the room, flushed and out-of-breath. Luna looked up at the boy, and her face paled.

"Jim?" she called out in an urgent voice.

"Not now, Luna," he replied tersely without even looking at the girl.

Luna shot up out off the couch and shouted at him "*JIM!*" He stopped in surprise and looked back at the girl. Her eyes widened. "What did you *DO*, Jim?!" she said almost fearfully. He stared back at her for a few seconds with an equally fearful look on his own face. Then, he ran up the stairs to the boy's dormitory.

"Luna?" Hermione spoke softly. "What's happened?"

Luna turned towards her and started rubbing her arms as if she'd suddenly grown cold. "Something bad."

"Is there something specific we should be doing about ... the bad something?" Hermione asked carefully. Luna thought for a second and then shook her head. "Alright, then. Let's just sit back down. And I want you to tell me *everything* about what you noticed about Jim as he came in. And every way you think he's different now than he was before."

The two sat, and Hermione began to furiously copy down Luna's description of what she saw in Jim that so alarmed her. About fifteen minutes later, the door opened again, and Emily Rossen came in just as out-of-breath as Jim had been. "Has anyone seen Potter?" she asked the room.

Percy stood up from his seat near the fireplace where he'd been talking to Ron about the younger boy's Charms assignment. "Yes, he just went up to his room."

"Would you go and get him please?" she said tersely. Percy nodded and headed upstairs.

"Emily, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

The Head Girl, who seemed visibly angry, just shook her head. "I'm sorry, Hermione. It's not something I can talk about right now."

A moment later, Percy returned with a fidgety Jim. "Is there a problem?" he asked nervously.

Emily looked at the Boy-Who-Lived with obvious disdain. "Your brother Harry is in the infirmary. *Someone* attacked him." Jim's eyes bulged at her description. "Well, in a manner of speaking, anyway. I'm sure Professor Lockhart can explain it better than I. Also, your parents are on their way there as well. As is the Headmaster. This way please." And without further comment, she led the now-frightened

boy towards the door. But before they could get through it, Neville came in. He saw Jim and immediately move towards him with a murderous look on his face. Emily stepped between them.

"It's alright, Neville. I'm taking Jim to the infirmary now. You will stay here and calm yourself. Understood?"

The boy glared at Jim with barely contained fury. "Fine. I'll be here whenever you get back." With that, Emily led the shocked Jim out of the dorm.

The still distraught Neville made his way over to the sofa where Luna and Hermione were waiting, and they moved so he could sit down between them.

"Neville, what happened?" asked Hermione with concern.

"I..." he stopped suddenly overcome with emotion. Luna reached up and started rubbing his upper back in a circular motion.

"Shhh," she said. "Close your eyes and count down from ten in your head while you breathe. It will sing them to sleep. Then you can tell us"

Without even thinking much about it, he put his head down into his hands and did as she asked. Hermione fought down the temptation to take notes on what Luna had said and instead just waited quietly. Once Neville had calmed down, he told them what had happened ... as well as his fears for what significance the word "*Suppertime!*" might have when it came to Harry's uncle and the doxies that had nearly killed him.

Over by the fire, Ron continued reviewing his notes from the day's classes, seemingly oblivious to the drama that

surrounded him.

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### ***Later in the Infirmary ...***

Lily Potter ran into the infirmary and was immediately intercepted by Lockhart and Madame Pomfrey.

"Lily! Harry's alright!" said the mediwitch. "I just gave him a Dreamless Sleep. He'll be out until tomorrow."

"What happened? Emily just said he'd been hurt."

Madame Pomfrey paused, and her mouth tightened. "It was a severe reaction to boggart exposure. It gave him a flashback to the doxy incident, and the trauma sent him into shock. But I've already treated him, and as I said, he'll be *fine* by morning."

Lily glared at Lockhart. "And how *exactly* did he end up exposed to a *boggart*?"

Lockhart sniffed. "In light of these traumatic circumstances, Professor Potter, I'll forgive your tone. Your son was initially exposed to the boggart under my close supervision as part of his advanced DADA training, and *he performed admirably*, banishing the boggart easily without any necessary intervention on my part. It was not until later in the session that *someone else* intentionally unleashed the boggart a second time when Mr. Potter was closest to it and under circumstances in which he could not effectively defend himself. I banished the creature myself immediately, but not until after several seconds of direct exposure, for which you have my profuse apologies."

"And who was it that unleashed a boggart on my son?" she asked angrily.

"I don't know, Professor Potter, but according to the Head Girl, it was someone wearing an invisibility cloak. You can ask her yourself. She's on her way back here now with your other son."

Lily paled. "Jim? Why is she bringing him here?"

Lockhart chuckled. "Well, I assumed he'd want to be here out of concern for his brother. Was I mistaken?"

Lily didn't answer, for at that moment, Emily and Jim entered the infirmary. "Ah, speak of the devil. Miss Rossen, I was just telling Professor Potter that some invisible assailant was responsible for unleashing the boggart against Mr. Potter and Mr. Flint. Could you share your observations with us?"

She nodded. "The person was definitely invisible and must have been in the room for some time. I don't think it was an invisibility spell because all the ones I know end instantly if you cast any other spell, and the intruder definitely used the Door-Opening Charm on the trunk which held the boggart while maintaining invisibility. Also, as the intruder knocked me down on the way to the door, I felt some silk-like fabric brush against my leg. I'm fairly confident it was someone with an invisibility cloak." With that last remark, Emily turned to look directly at Jim, who didn't make eye contact.

"Jim," said Lily. "Come with me." With that, she took her younger son by the arm, and led him off to a corner where she hastily erected a privacy shield around them both. "Now you listen to me, James Potter Jr. You have one chance to tell me the absolute truth. Because if you lie to me and I find out later, I swear to God and Merlin both that I will pull you out of this school and home-school you at the Manor

until you're old enough to take your NEWTS! Now did you have anything to do with what happened to your brother?"

As those two were talking, Marcus Flint came from around the corner and joined Emily and Professor Lockhart. The look he gave Jim Potter suggested a strong desire to hex the boy in the back.

"Feeling better, Flint?" said Lockhart somewhat loudly.

"Yes sir," he replied in a low voice, without taking his eyes of Jim's back.

"Excellent!" said Lockhart as he loudly clapped his hands together, startling to two prefects. "Then, I suppose there's no reason for you to dally around here. Miss Rossen still has her evening rounds to do. Perhaps you could accompany her for a while before heading back to your dormitory."

Marcus looked up at Lockhart for a few seconds as if to be sure he'd interpreted the hidden order correctly: *get out of here before you do something stupid to the Boy-Who-Lived and get expelled*. Then, he nodded respectfully and followed Emily out of the Infirmary. Lockhart watched them leave and then turned to study Lily and Jim's silent conversation.

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### ***Minutes later ...***

"I bet the little swot gets off scot free," muttered Flint.

"I don't think so," replied Emily. "Professor McGonagall has very little patience for Jim at this point. If he's proven guilty, which I think is likely, I'm sure she'll insist on a fair punishment."

Flint snorted but didn't respond. The two walked in silence towards the dungeons.

"Are you ... angry that everyone saw your boggart?" Emily asked tentatively.

"What do you think? I'm seventeen years old, a prefect about to graduate, and my biggest fear is still the crazy old bitch who died when I was six. Would *you* want everyone to know that?"

She shrugged. "Did you banish it successfully? The first time you saw it, I mean?"

He was silent for a few seconds. "It took me two tries, but I got her. You?"

It was Emily's turn to hesitate. "No. My boggart was a clown who terrified at a birthday party when I was a small child. I've been afraid of clowns ever since. I tried three times to banish it but I couldn't. I mean ... how can you make *clowns* funny if you're instinctively afraid of them?"

He considered the idea. "That's a good question. I never thought of it that way."

They walked in silence until they reached the entrance to the dorm. "Well," he said. "Thanks for, um ... Just ... thanks."

"Don't mention, Flint." She turned to go

"Rossen!" he said suddenly. She stopped and turned back to him. "How are you at potions?"

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Not long after, Lily and Jim were joined by James Potter (who looked like he'd gotten back up out of bed to Floo to

the school), Dumbledore, Snape and McGonagall. Lockhart once again explained what happened, and then Lily turned to her son.

"Jim, I believe you have something you wanted to say at this point," she prompted.

The boy looked sullen and beaten down. "I ... I was the one in the invisibility cloak. I believed... I still believe that Harry played a prank on me the other day, so I used the cloak to spy on his boggart test. When I saw ... well, the first time he confronted the boggart, it was just a really big fat version of our Uncle Vernon. I ... thought it was funny that his biggest fear was just a Muggle, so when the rest of the team came in, I let the boggart out again. I promise I didn't mean for it to turn into a bunch of doxies and attack him like that. I... I'm sorry. I'll take to whatever punishment you think is appropriate."

Snape sniffed and then looked towards McGonagall, who was as angry as he'd seen his fellow professor in years.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor, plus one month of detention," she said. Jim gasped but then nodded. James looked as though he wanted to say something but thought better of it. Then, Lockhart coughed delicately.

"I am curious about one detail," he said. "On the night of the Sorting Feast, Headmaster, you referred the students to Mr. Filch's list of forbidden items. I haven't reviewed that list myself, but I would be rather surprised if invisibility cloaks were not on it."

"They are indeed *normally* forbidden, Gilderoy," said Dumbledore. "However, there is a general exception to the rules governing contraband items which are also classified as family heirlooms. While most invisibility cloaks are



common magical items, the Potter Cloak is such a family artifact and thus is not covered by the general prohibition. The exception was put into effect by the Board of Governors in 1908 during the tenure of Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black. There was some speculation on the part of the Board that Black had abused his position as Headmaster to improperly seize magical items which were properly entailed to noble estates."

"Mm-hmm," said Lockhart. "From what I've heard, that *does* sound like something he'd have done. Be that as it may, however, is such an artifact really the sort thing to which a twelve-year-old child should have unfettered access?"

"Jim is the Boy-Who-Lived," said James tersely. "He needs to be able to defend himself, and as his father and the Head of House Potter, I have decided that he should have access to our family's cloak."

"Of course, of course," said Lockhart. "And out of curiosity, since his arrival at Hogwarts, how many times has he actually needed the cloak for self-defense rather than personal entertainment?" James bristled at that, while Jim looked terrified of losing access to the family cloak. Finally, Lily spoke up.

"I can see where this is going, so perhaps I can suggest a compromise. During Jim's month of detention, the cloak will remain with Professor McGonagall. Perhaps four weeks without it will teach Jim some responsibility." With that, she turned towards James, as if daring him to contradict her. He grimaced but said nothing.

"I think a temporary confiscation of Jim's cloak is a most satisfactory solution," said Dumbledore, who then turned to

Jim. "I hope this will help you to understand how these pranks can suddenly turn very serious, young man. And I also hope you will do the right thing and apologize to your brother as soon as possible so that the two of you can hopefully put this behind you."

Jim nodded. With that, the impromptu disciplinary meeting ended. Professor McGonagall accompanied Jim to take custody of the invisibility cloak, while Lily and James went once more to check on Harry's prognosis, and Snape went to inform the Slytherins of what had happened and how they were to respond.

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### ***One hour later ...***

Just as he was about to retire for the night, there was a knock at Severus Snape's door. He opened it, and to his surprise, Lily Potter pushed past him into his sitting room. He closed the door and turned to face her.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Lady Potter."

"Let's just cut to the chase, Severus. I know you're more skilled than me at dueling and far more skilled than me at the Dark Arts. But I do have one thing going for me - I'm an angry mother, whether you think I'm entitled to that status or not. And I am telling you right now that *neither of us* is leaving this room until you tell me *exactly* what happened between Harry and Vernon Dursley on the night of the doxy attack!"

# The Boggart (Pt 2)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 23: The Boggart (Pt. 2)

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*Jim nodded. With that, the impromptu disciplinary meeting ended. Professor McGonagall accompanied Jim to take custody of the invisibility cloak, while Lily and James went once more to check on Harry's prognosis, and the other staff members retired for the night.*

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Jim stepped into the Gryffindor Common Room, followed by McGonagall. Instantly, he froze. It looked like over half the House was there waiting for him, and most of them looked unhappy. Longbottom, Granger and Lovegood sat together on a sofa. The first two were staring at him in judgment, the third with something that looked strangely like pity. From over in a corner, Ron flashed him a smile and a nod, reassuring Jim that he would still have at least one friend in the House, but everyone else just looked at him in confusion and worry, as if waiting to hear how the Boy-Who-Lived had screwed up this week.

At McGonagall's direction, Jim went upstairs to retrieve the cloak while she addressed the House. With an icy calm, she explained to everyone that Jim had performed a prank which had injured another student and informed them of his punishment. The reaction was a mixture of shock at the nature of the offense and fury over the points lost. McGonagall also announced that her tolerance for pranks was at an end, and any further pranks against Slytherin House would be met with the harshest sanctions. Jim returned with the cloak and gave it to McGonagall, who left without another word to him.

Later, Jim and Ron were sitting alone in their dorm room discussing what had happened.

"It's not fair," said Ron bitterly.

Jim shrugged. "I deserved it. If anything, I probably got off easy. It was stupid of me to let the boggart loose like that. It's lucky he wasn't hurt worse."

"I thought the plan was to just get a picture of Harry's boggart with Colin's camera. What happened?"

"The first time, Harry was too fast. The boggart popped out and took Vernon's form... sort of... but Harry banished it before I could take the picture. I thought I could let it out again and then take a quick photo before he could get his wand out. I just thought it was Uncle Vernon he was afraid of. I should have realized that doxies would play a part in it."

"So? How does that change things?" Ron asked.

Jim sighed. "Mum says if your boggart is actually based on a physically traumatic event, exposure causes you to relieve that trauma. When Harry couldn't banish the boggart the

second time, he *felt* as though he was getting stung nearly to death again. It must have been agonizing."

Ron was silent for several seconds. "Look, it may have been bad for Harry, but that punishment was still way too harsh for an accident. If you want me to, I'll go to McGonagall and tell her the whole 'boggart thing' was originally my idea to begin with. Maybe she'll split your detention time and give some of it to me."

Jim smiled wanly and punched his friend in the arm. "Nah, mate. It was your idea, but it was my screw-up, so I'll take the punishment. There's no reason for *both* of us to be in the doghouse."

"If you think that's best. So what are you going to do about Harry? You *know* he'll come after you for this."

"I'll talk to him tomorrow morning and apologize. I hope he'll agree to, well, a cease-fire I guess."

"He won't honor it, Jim. He's a *Slytherin*!"

"Hey now, your *sister's* a Slytherin, mate!" Jim said with a smile. "We need to be a bit more open-minded now, don't we?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Never mind Ginny. Harry's the one who'll be coming after you."

"And if he does, I'll deal with it. But if I do, *I can't get caught*. I've lost my father's cloak for a month! If I get caught pranking Harry again, I might lose it for good."

Ron nodded sagely at that and then looked at his friend quizzically. "I've always meant to ask you - what's the deal

with that cloak, anyway? It sure looks a lot higher quality than most invisibility cloaks I've seen."

Jim smiled and puffed up a bit in pride. "Have I never told you? It's got quite a history to it." And with a smug expression, he began expounding on that history to his best friend who listened with rapt attention.

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### ***Meanwhile in the Slytherin Common Room***

"Right, you lot!" bellowed Flint to get everyone's attention. "I just talked to Professor Snape. Here's all the news you're going to get so listen up. Earlier tonight during Lockhart's DADA session on boggarts, the Other Potter snuck in and let the boggart loose, and it attacked our Potter when he couldn't defend himself. He's in the infirmary until morning, but he'll be fine. In fact, I'm pretty sure the little bugger was faking most of it to get the Git-Who-Lived into trouble. In that, he succeeded, since the Other Potter has four weeks of detention and cost his house *fifty points*."

Several Slytherins openly laughed at that. "So," Marcus continued, "the word handed down by Snape himself is as follows: *do nothing to Jim Potter over this*. Got it?"

"So we're just going to let him get away with this? With attacking one of our own?" said Adrian Pucey angrily.

Missy Bulstrode stepped forward. "No, Pucey. It means we're going to get him *our way*. The *Slytherin* way. Right now, Jim Potter has his Head of House and most of the Gryffs furious at him. *And* he's got ten hours of detention every week for the next month. That will cut into his Quidditch practice time almost up until the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match on November 7th. Don't do *anything* between now and then that might cause people

to get back on his side. Talk this up among the Claws and even the Puffs. Make sure everyone knows that this was an unprovoked attack by a Gryffindor bully. With luck, he'll snap and pull something else and get kicked off the Quidditch team altogether."

Everyone nodded at that properly Slytherin approach, and the members of the House broke up and headed for bed. Theo and Blaise sidled up to Marcus.

"So," Blaise asked quietly but intently, "was Harry really faking it or was he actually hurt?"

Marcus looked around to make sure they were alone. "It was ... bad. It could have been a lot worse. I mean, he'll be out in the morning instead of stuck in St. Mungo's for a week with the Mind Healers. But, yeah, it was pretty bad. And if Lockhart hadn't stopped me, I'd have hexed that little bastard as soon as he came into the infirmary. But I have to admit, Snape's got a point. I think Harry would much rather we just let everyone in the school think the Git's a needlessly cruel bully than get involved in some stupid prank war that will be bad for the House's reputation."

The two boys nodded and then went off to brainstorm on rumors to spread about the Boy-Who-Lived. It was the Slytherin way.

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### ***Just before midnight in the quarters of Severus Snape***

...

*Just as he was about to retire for the night, there was a knock at Severus Snape's door. He opened it, and to his surprise, Lily Potter pushed past him into his sitting room. He closed the door and turned to face her.*

*"To what do I owe the pleasure, Lady Potter."*

*"Let's just cut to the chase, Severus. I know you're more skilled than me at dueling and far more skilled than me at the Dark Arts. But I do have one thing going for me - I'm an angry mother. And I am telling you right now that neither of us is leaving this room until you tell me exactly what happened between Harry and Vernon Dursley on the night of the doxy attack!"*

Snape stared for a few seconds at his old friend. Then ... he laughed. "Your righteous indignation is noted, Lily. But it is hardly impressive enough to induce me to betray any of my charges' confidences, not even your son's. In any case, I fail to see what answers you want from me. There is very little I could tell you that's not already spelled out in the auror's report."

That was a lie, of course, as there was a **great deal** of sensitive information about Harry Potter to which Snape was privy that was **not** in the auror's report, but he thought it would be sufficient to divert the angry woman. Lily stared at him silently with her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Ah. I see," said Snape in sudden understanding. "You did not even know that there was an auror's report. Which raises the question: Did your husband the Senior Auror simply forget to mention it to you? Or did he overtly lie about its contents?"

It took all of Snape's skill at Occlumency to not smile at the look of rising fury on Lily's face.

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***Early the next morning...***



Jim woke before dawn as normal and headed downstairs for his morning workout. He was surprised to find a pajama-clad Neville Longbottom already in the Common Room, sitting in an overstuffed chair, waiting for him.

"Longbottom," he said, somewhat uneasily.

"Potter," the boy replied coldly.

"Look," Jim said, "I know you're mad at me, and you have reason to be. But I've accepted my punishment and I'm going to apologize to Harry later this morning. I hope that will be the end of it. But if you try to start something with me on Harry's behalf, I *will* defend myself."

Neville sniffed disdainfully. "I'll keep that in mind. And I'm glad to see you're accepting your punishment and apologizing, since that's pretty much the bare minimum I'd have expected from any decent person. Anyway, I was just curious. What exactly *is* your problem with Harry?"

Jim stiffened. "I don't know what you mean."

"Last year, you stood up to You-Know-Who with Harry at your side. One would think that would have been some kind of bonding experience for you and your long lost twin. But no, you're still as mean towards him as ever. And even though you know You-Know-Who is floating around, you're more interested in playing pranks on Harry. I don't get it. It's like you're *jealous* of the brother who got sent off to live with abusive Muggles."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Longbottom. And besides, Harry *started* this prank war."

"Well, good job finishing it. Has it occurred to you yet that the price you'll be paying both in detentions and in ill-will

from the other Gryffindors will be *worse* than the effects of any of the pranks you claim Harry has played on you so far?"

Jim started to respond angrily but then deflated. "Yeah, Longbottom. Actually that *has* occurred to me. In fact, that thought pretty much kept me up all night. Satisfied?"

"Not quite. Did you see *everyone's* boggarts last night?"

He hesitated before answering. "Yes. For what it's worth, you actually did the best out of the whole class."

"Thanks," Neville said sarcastically. "So I guess you know everyone's biggest fears, huh."

Jim looked away. He'd been expecting conventional fears – monsters, wild animals, things like that. It had left him deeply uncomfortable to realize that over half the people in Harry's study group had boggart-fears manifesting as family members or which were otherwise related to generally traumatic childhoods. He'd never fully grasped just how ... sheltered his upbringing had been, and not just compared to Harry's.

"I ... I won't tell what anyone's fears are, Neville. I promise."

The other boy nodded. "Good to know. But I was curious about one thing. How many seconds did it take Harry to banish his boggart?"

Jim crooked an eyebrow. The question was unexpected. "I dunno. Two, maybe three seconds. Why?"

"You think you could beat him?"

He stiffened. "What do you mean?"

Neville finally stood up from his chair and walked right up to look Jim directly in the eye. "I mean, do you think you could possibly have handled that boggart as well as your brother? It's easy to laugh at other people's fears, Potter, when you've never faced your own. You've been given every advantage while Harry's fought for every scrap he has, and he's still better than you in every way that I think matters. Frankly, Potter, as '*Boys-Who-Lived*' go, you're a bit of a disappointment."

And with that, Neville simply walked back upstairs, leaving the other boy alone with his shame and frustration.

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***Later that morning around 10:00 a.m. in the office of Rufus Scrimgeour...***

The Chief Auror carefully removed the letter with the Hogwarts insignia from the barn owl which had delivered. Then, he took an owl treat from a candy dish on his desk and tossed it to the bird before sending it away. The name at the top of the letter caught him by surprise, and the request contained in the letter's body even more so. Putting it aside, Scrimgeour rose painfully from his desk and hobbled around to the door leaning heavily on the cane that was now a permanent fixture in his life. He poked his head out the door and called out for his secretary.

"Eleanor," he said. But then, before he could give any instructions, he noticed James Potter standing nearby talking with Kingsley Shacklebolt about a case. "Come into my office please."

Eleanor Burke, the ancient witch who'd been the secretary for Rufus Scrimgeour and the three Chief Aurors who

preceded him, came into the office armed with a pad and a Ministry-issue Everfull Quill.

"Yes, Chief Auror?"

Rufus sat back down slowly as he considered his instructions. "Eleanor, I need you to pull a recently closed file for me. It was an incident report involving Harry Potter and his Muggle relatives. Make one copy and send it via secured owl post to Professor Lily Potter at Hogwarts. Oh, and make another copy and bring it to me." Then, he coughed somewhat delicately. "If at all possible, I'd rather James Potter *not* know about this."

"Certainly, sir. I'll get it done straight away." Seeing that Scrimgeour had no other orders, the witch left to do as he'd instructed. Rufus watched the woman depart, mildly curious as to how she'd go about letting Potter know what he'd specifically instructed her not to tell him and what promises Potter would have to make in exchange for the information. Eleanor had been loyal to him for years, but she'd been a Slytherin too, and they both knew he was on his way out. Accordingly, she'd happily take this chance to find out if Potter was someone with whom she could deal. Probably not. Potter was too much of a Gryffindor for the ... ethical fluidity it took to surround himself with people like Eleanor and make proper use of their particular skill sets. In fact, Rufus felt confident that Potter was too much of a Gryffindor to handle any part of the Chief Auror's duties. The best Chief Aurors had always been either Slytherins or Hufflepuffs, after all. Even worse, Scrimgeour thought that James Potter embodied the absolute worst combination of Gryffindor merits and flaws. Bold when he should be cautious, and overbearing when he should be discreet. Morally rigid when times call for pragmatism, and yet almost cowardly when matters as insignificant as reputation

and personal honor were all that were at stake. All in all, a disastrous mix of qualities for a Chief Auror. Alas, the ultimate decision was Fudge's, and Fudge was far too enamored of the Boy-Who-Lived's fame to care about James Potter's deficiencies. Then again, getting the Chief Auror's job wasn't the same as *keeping* it.

*"Power wears out those who cannot hold it, Chief Auror Potter,"* he thought to himself, repeating the adage that old Caractacus Flint had shared with him all those decades ago. Then, Scrimgeour shook his head and returned to his work.

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## **Back at Hogwarts ...**

Jim had tried to visit Harry in the infirmary, but his brother had already checked out. He also looked for Harry that morning and at lunch, but the boy was nowhere to be found. So instead, he resolved to meet with Harry and apologize before DADA that afternoon. But while he couldn't find Harry, he did have one brief encounter with Ginny Weasley. The girl walked straight up to him as he was entering the Great Hall at lunchtime and thrust a book at him. It was an autographed copy of ***Jim Potter and The Secret of Skull Mountain***.

"Here," she said without preamble. "I don't need this anymore. I'm too old for fairy tales." Then, she turned and stalked off.

After lunch, as the Gryffindors and Slytherins waited for Lockhart to open the door for the afternoon's DADA class, Jim tried to get close enough to Harry to talk, with Ron by his side. To Jim's surprise, nearly the entire Second Year Slytherin class closed ranks behind his brother, including Draco and his bookends. It was a startling show of unity in

support of Harry from a House that was not known for loyalty and camaraderie. Jim cleared his throat.

"Harry?" he began somewhat nervously. "I was wondering if we could talk for a minute? You know ... away from everyone?"

Harry stared at him impassively for several seconds "What about, Jim?" he finally said.

Jim swallowed. "About ... about what happened last night."

Harry stared some more and then looked down almost languidly at his watch. "Class is about to start, Jim. I don't think we'll have time. And I'll be tied up after class. I have a checkup with Madam Pomfrey scheduled at 4."

Jim winced, acutely aware of how everyone, Slytherin and Gryffindor, was watching. "Well, maybe after supper?"

After a few seconds, Harry smiled. "Alright, Jim. Meet me at 7:00 in Classroom 102. It's just down from the Great Hall so it will be convenient for us both. Does that work for you?"

Jim nodded and started to speak again when the classroom door opened. Harry turned and walked through the door without the slightest further acknowledgment of him and with the entire Second Year Slytherin class in tow. The Gryffindors followed, and while they weren't as cold as the Slytherins, most of them still gave Jim the cold shoulder, though Ron, as usual, was there to support him. Inside, the students took their seats somewhat cautiously. Lockhart was already seated behind his desk and staring off to one side of the classroom with an unusually grim expression. There was a pensieve on his desk. The students took their seats and waited patiently while the teacher seemed to ignore their presence. Finally, just as they were starting to

look back and forth at one another nervously, he stirred and began to speak.

"Put your books away, class," he said almost quietly. "I'll be lecturing off the syllabus today, so do *try* to stay awake. Now, I imagine you all know about the incident last night in which a boggart was unleashed in uncontrolled circumstances. Without going into detail, I will say that the matter troubles me greatly, particularly as one person's greatest fear was publicly exposed in front of the entire assembled group. Rather than allow the school's rumor mill to run amok, I have decided to address that person's fear, and the issues implicated by it, this week in all my DADA classes."

Harry stiffened in his seat in surprise and betrayal, and he was acutely aware of the concerned expressions being shot his way by all of his friends. On the back row, Jim closed his eyes and pinched his brow between his fingers.

"But first," Lockhart continued, "there is some terminology we should discuss, terminology that, to be frank, none of you were able to adequately answer from my little quiz." He stood and gestured with his wand. "**PYROLOGOS.**" Then, he continued flicking his wand as if he were writing on a blackboard, and in response, flaming letters appeared in the air. In a vertical line on the left side were three words: Dark, Light, and Grey. Across the top were five more words in a horizontal line: Magic, Wizards, Lords, Objects and Creatures.

"What is '*dark magic*'?" he asked. "I ask rhetorically, students, as I am in no mood for the Socratic method today. There are many definitions of dark magic, particularly among lay-wizards. Most of these definitions are influenced by the lay-wizard's views on morality or ethics or simply

grounded in ignorance. Most of them are also rubbish. In point of fact, there is only one definition of dark magic that matters in the eyes of the British wizarding law. Dark magic is magic used in the commission of a violent crime or for any other violent antisocial act. For purposes of this definition, you may consider violence against the mind or soul to be equivalent to violence against the body. Accordingly, a dark wizard is a wizard or witch who uses magic for deliberate intentional violence or to violate the body, mind or soul of another sentient being without the lawful right to do so. The actual spell used doesn't matter. If you use Wingardium Leviosa to levitate a brick in order to bash someone's brains in and you didn't act in self-defense or defense of others, *you are a dark wizard* and, in that context, Wingardium Leviosa is a dark spell. Similarly, some might describe Rictumsempra, the Tickling Charm, to be the mildest form of offensive magic we teach at Hogwarts, but that didn't stop Erasmus Wilkes from modifying it into a dark curse that literally caused his victims to laugh themselves to death. That said, some spells are considered 'darker' than others in the sense that such spells have very little utility outside of violent crime. Similarly, a propensity to regularly use magic aggressively makes a wizard darker than one who only occasionally dabbles in such conflicts. There are also a few very rare spells which are invariably considered dark because they are also esoteric in nature and the mindset needed to cast them automatically brands the wizards as being of a violent or cruel nature. The Unforgivables are but the most famous of these. If one believes in conspiracy theories, there are a handful of even darker spells now lost to us but identified by the legendary Anathema Codex, spells which are considered so intrinsically evil that mere knowledge of how to perform them is proscribed, though if the Codex ever truly existed, the Ministry has long since erased all public knowledge of it along with the spells it described. Outside of those rare



examples of indisputably dark magic, whether a spell is dark or not is largely a question of semantics and circumstances."

Lockhart rose, walked to the side of his desk, and tapped his wand to the pensieve. A ghostly mist rose from it and coalesced into the translucent life-sized form of a cruel-looking man with a thick beard and Slavic features and who was dressed in an Azkaban prisoner's uniform.

"Case in point: In the last war, the Death Eater Antonin Dolohov was notorious for his signature use of the Entrail-Expelling Curse which, well, does exactly what the name implies. As an example of dark magic, the Entrail-Expelling Curse is easily one of the most deadly spells known to wizards, arguably second only to the Killing Curse in terms of lethality. It *can* be blocked or parried, unlike the Killing Curse, but otherwise a victim hit by it even with a glancing blow *will die* in less than ten seconds absent the immediate application of extremely high-level healing magic of a sort normally available only to healers in the St. Mungo's emergency ward. Most wizards would unquestionably consider the curse to be extremely dark magic, and yet it can be found in a tome upstairs in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library. Despite its restriction, that tome is *not* a book on dark magic. On the contrary, it's called **Rackharrow's Guide to Magical Farming**, and it is actually a collection of spells used for animal husbandry. Dolohov's favorite curse was the reason for its restriction, as no other spell in the book has any combat applications whatsoever. You see, the Entrail-Expelling Curse was originally known less theatrically as the Hog-Slaughtering Charm. The spell was developed by Eastern European wizards in the 15th century to facilitate the slaughter and preparation of farm animals prior to cooking. And believe it or not, Antonin Dolohov was apparently the first person in

the spell's entire history to ever think to employ the spell against a living human rather than a dead pig, for which he is currently serving a life-sentence in Azkaban."

Lockhart flicked his wrist, and flaming check marks appeared at the intersection of Dark/Wizard and Dark/Magic.

"In light of what I've just said, it should not surprise you to learn that a similar analysis applies to dark objects and dark creatures. A dark object is an object enchanted to harm others in some capacity, such as the cursed toys produced by Erasmus Wilkes. A dark creature is a magical animal that is inherently hostile towards living beings and especially wizards and witches, usually one bred by dark wizards for that purpose. To be classified as a dark creature, the animal must either be of a sort that is highly susceptible to control by a dark wizard and thus useful as an attack animal *or* the creature must have some degree of sentience and intelligence but nevertheless regard wizarding kind as either an enemy or as a food source. Dragons are incredibly dangerous Class XXXXX creatures, but they are not *dark* because they lack the intellect to *choose* to harm wizards and because they are not generally suitable for use by dark wizards as creatures of mass destruction. Acromantulas, on the other hand, *are* dark creatures because they are intelligent beings capable of conversing with us and yet still willing to *eat* us for food. Likewise, inferi, while not sentient, are still dark creatures, for they are the created servants of necromancers, bound to obey their creators' destructive whims. Goblins were, at one point, considered dark creatures until various magical treaties limited their ability to indiscriminately attack us, and so that descriptor was removed from them."

He flicked his wand again, adding check marks for Dark/Objects and Dark/Creatures.

"Now, having mentioned two notorious Death Eaters, let us segue into the topic of Dark Lords. This term has a bit more nuance to it compared to ordinary dark wizards. A dark wizard is any wizard who uses magic for violence or destruction. A Dark Lord – both words are always capitalized, by the way – is a dark wizard whose violence targets society itself. Some seek political conquest. Others pursue forbidden magic that, if unleashed, threatens destruction or loss of life on a massive scale. Many of them do both. And yet, the term Dark Lord also has a political dimension to it. For if a Dark Lord is someone who threatens society, then it follows that anyone who threatens the political status quo risks being called a Dark Lord. Raise your hand if you've ever heard of the Dark Lord McAvity."

No one raised their hand.

"Not surprising." Lockhart tapped the bowl again, and the image of Antonin Dolohov was replaced by that of an earnest-looking man wearing a wizard's robe over a distinctly Muggle business suit. "Alexander McAvity was a Muggleborn wizard who graduated Hogwarts in 1952 at the top of his class only to be denied employment at the Ministry due to his blood status. Incensed at the institutional bigotry against Muggleborns that continued to flourish even in the aftermath of the Grindelwald Conflict, McAvity sought to organize his fellow Muggleborns, politically isolated Halfbloods, and socially-conscious Purebloods into a political group that would fight for the rights of Muggleborn, squibs and Muggles. The government and the media condemned him as a Dark Lord who would tear down our entire society and shatter the Statute of Secrecy *blah-blah-blah*, and he was accused of all sorts of

crimes that he couldn't possibly have committed, particularly since the man was an admirer of the Muggle political activist Mahatma Gandhi, one of the Muggle world's most prominent advocates for non-violent political change. While McAvity did win several important concessions from the Wizengamot, he was eventually forced to flee the country to evade several trumped up charges brought by the Ministry that would have sent him to Azkaban. Today, the 'Dark Lord McAvity' is a senior official in the government of Wizarding Australia, a fact which causes all kinds of unpleasantness at the ICW meetings to which he is a delegate. The movement he created survived his departure, however, and won further concessions throughout the 60's and 70's. Some argue that the rise of You-Know-Who was precipitated in part by the successes of McAvity and his followers which frightened the more reactionary Purebloods into embracing anyone who promised to preserve their power and status."

He turned to add another check mark but then stopped and turned back to the class. "There is one other important aspect to the term Dark Lord. Unlike the other terms I've mentioned, '*Dark Lord*' has a secondary meaning. Specifically, it is a term of art in the field of Divination. True prophecies almost never mention evil wizards by name but instead use the expression '*Dark Lord*' to identify a particularly awful dark wizard whose destined rise and/or defeat is foretold by the prophecy. In other words, in the context of prophecy, a Dark Lord is a wizard so terrible that Magic and Fate themselves have taken notice of him." At that, Jim and Harry and their friends who fought against Voldemort the previous year turned to look at one another. According to Voldemort himself, the prophecy about Jim referred to '*the one with the power to vanquish **the Dark Lord***.'

"Now, I saved the term '*Dark Lord*' for last because, as it happens, it is only in reference to Dark Lords that the terms Light and Grey matter at all. There are no light spells or light objects. Some people assume that the Patronus Charm is a 'light spell' because of its effectiveness against some dark creatures, but ultimately, it merely requires the wizard to be able to maintain a happy thought, and there have been many dark wizards who could cast the Patronus. There is only one arguably light creature: the phoenix, though opinion is rather divided on the matter due to that noble bird's rarity. No, '*The Light*' as the term is generally used in Magical Britain simply refers to whatever political alliance sets itself into opposition against the Dark Lord of the day, and "the Grey" refers simply to those who practice neutrality between the two sides to the extent they are able. Some Grey families avoid such conflicts completely by going into seclusion or fleeing the country for the duration of the conflict. Others actively encourage different family members to join both sides of any conflict so that *someone* will be assured of living through it. However, these political terms are ultimately fluid and driven by social consensus. Albus Dumbledore was considered the Leader of the Light during the Grindelwald Conflict and again during the Wizarding War against You-Know-Who. However, Abraxas Malfoy of all people *claimed* the title of Lord of Light during Alexander McAvity's period of activity, a claim effectively endorsed by both the Wizengamot and our media over the objections of Albus Dumbledore, who was considered Grey in that conflict even though he openly agreed with McAvity on many points."

Lockhart added question marks to Light/Lord and Grey/wizard and X's to all the other Light and Grey combinations. Meanwhile, several students turned to look towards Draco, whose face revealed nothing of his thoughts, not even whether he'd even been aware of the

conflict between his grandfather and "the Dark Lord" McAvity. Lockhart paused as if to collect himself before forging ahead. "Now then, with our terminology established, let us move on to the true topic of today's lecture, a topic which lies at the intersection of Dark Lord, dark magic, dark creature and dark wizard. Students, let me introduce to you ... my greatest fear."

And with that, Lockhart tapped the pensieve again, and the smiling face of Alexander McAvity was replaced with a monstrosity – the same half-frenzied werewolf that the boggart turned into the night before. Several students gasped out loud, and on the front row, Lavender Brown gave out a small squeak of fear. Harry didn't flinch, but he was surprised to feel ... *something* poking around his Occlumency shields. Inexplicably, it made him think of some feral animal scratching at the door to his room, looking for a way in.

"Do you all feel that?" asked Lockhart. "The fear? The intuitive sense that you are now a prey animal and a predator stalks nearby? There is no shame in it. That sensation is supernaturally induced, an inherent property of the werewolf which is as much a part of its arsenal as tooth or claw. And what you feel now is muted. That is only a frozen memory of my encounter with this ... charming fellow, and the psychically-induced fear you're experiencing right now is less potent than that generated by a boggart copying the beast and far less potent than that generated by the true beast itself. In the presence an actual transformed werewolf, most people are so paralyzed with fear that they're barely capable of running for their lives, let alone mounting any sort of defense."

Lockhart paced around the desk, never taking his eyes off the werewolf as he spoke, as if he didn't even trust his own

memory to not run amok. "There have always been those who had the power to become wolves. The occasional animagus. Wizards who had mastered human-animal Transfiguration. Some ancient wizards once bred the power to assume wolf form within isolated Muggle populations among the Vikings, the ancient Greeks, and certain tribes in the Americas, though those populations have been extinct for centuries. But none of those is ... a werewolf."

"The Lycanthropic Curse was created in the 14th century by the Dark Lord Emeric the Evil. Emeric wanted an army of bloodthirsty monsters bound to his will that could sweep across the land as his conquering army, and what we call lycanthropy represents the fruits of his experiments. The curse was, thankfully, an imperfect vessel for his ambitions. The werewolf is at its most powerful when fully transformed under the full moon, which is also the only time it can transmit the curse to others, but during that time, it is also a mindless predator incapable of higher reasoning. It was said that Emeric could exercise some control over them in this state, but never enough to deploy them as an effective fighting force. And even under his control, transformed werewolves almost always enter a ravenous frenzy when in combat and are far more likely to kill their targets when Emeric would have preferred to leave victims alive but cursed to grow his ranks. A rather important design flaw, and one which likely saved Wizarding Europe from conquest by an invincible werewolf army."

He turned back to face the class. "There are those who view werewolves as tragic and misunderstood creatures. They are only dangerous one night out of the month, they say. They are not responsible for their condition, they say. They deserve our pity and acceptance, they say." Lockhart's face hardened, and there was no trace of *Witch Weekly's* Winning Smile. "Sentimental *tripe*! Such

misplaced compassion ignores the *true* danger of the werewolf. Yes, the monster is only visible to the naked eye on the night of the full moon, but it is still there the rest of the month, lurking behind the werewolf's eyes. *Every* werewolf from the moment of infection carries the Beast within him. Most try to fight it as long as they can. Muggles rarely last more than a lunar cycle. Strong-willed wizards can last for years, and some research suggests that infected children have a greater resistance than most. But eventually, every werewolf gives in to the Beast."

He tapped the bowl again, and the werewolf disappeared to be replaced by a burly unshaven man with cruel eyes and a sneer. "*This* is Eustace Tully, also known as 'the Wagga Wagga Werewolf.'" Then, he stopped and chuckled. "No, no. Let us not hide behind pretense any longer. Students, raise your hand if you have actually *read* **Wanderings with Werewolves**. The whole book, not just the pocket part." About a third of the class raised their hands. "Well, *throw it out*. It's fiction. Rubbish, the whole book. I did not '*defeat the Wagga Wagga Werewolf with the Homomorphus Charm*.' That spell can force an animagus to revert to his human form but it has no effect on werewolves. And more importantly, there was no Wagga Wagga Werewolf *in the singular*. It was an entire *pack* consisting of *over a dozen* of these creatures! I was *forbidden* by three different wizarding governments as well as my publishers from revealing the true story of how I brought that pack down after it had cut a bloody swath through New South Wales. Because it would "*traumatize my readers*" to accurately relate the things I witnessed! Because it would stir up bigotry and hatred against those werewolves who were *not* ruthless cannibal-killers! Because it would have embarrassed the Australian Wizarding government for me to have *exposed their ineptitude in dealing with the werewolf threat!*" By this time, Lockhart was nearly



shouting in anger. He took a few breaths to calm himself. "And finally, because *I* might have faced criminal prosecution if I had revealed what spells I *really* used to bring Tully and his pack of animals down. Which is why that particular book is filled with drivel about using the Homomorphus Charm which any *idiot* should know would be ineffective!"

The class was so silent one could hear a pin drop. Lockhart turned back to the ghostly figure floating above the pensieve. "You have seen Eustace Tully on the night of the full moon. And here, you see Eustace Tully as he appeared when he pretended, however ineffectually, to be human. *This* is what Eustace Tully looked like to the vast majority of his victims." Lockhart tapped the pensieve again, and the figure of Eustace Tully changed, growing larger and more hirsute, and sprouting talon-like claws, jet black eyes and obvious fangs. "A werewolf who gives in to his Beast merges with it to become a hybrid creature. While he can only fully transform on the night of the full moon, he can assume *this* form at will. It will no doubt seem familiar to any of you who have seen pictures of the notorious Fenrir Greyback who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in the last war, for he maintains this transitional shape at all times. In it, the werewolf is stronger, faster and more damage-resistant than any human. His claws can cut to the bone, and they leave permanent curse marks even if they do not actually transmit the curse itself. But the most important change is *in here*."

With that, Lockhart turned back to the class and tapped his finger against his temple. "A werewolf who surrenders to his Beast abandons his humanity, as well as his ability to view humans as anything other than prey. Oh, he can *pretend*, of course. The werewolf is a cunning predator and sensible enough to feign humanity if doing so is

advantageous. But remember this! A werewolf who hunts and kills on the night of the full moon will eat his prey as any wild animal would. When Eustace Tully and his gang killed, they did so by the light of day. And when they *ate their victims*, they sat at dinner tables and used *knives and forks!*"

Lockhart regarded his horrified class, half of whom looked physically sick. "Any questions?"

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By late that afternoon, reports of Lockhart's ... *spirited* views about werewolves were all over the school, and Lockhart, Dumbledore and McGonagall were all absent from supper. The rumor mill was working overtime, and some students were certain that Lockhart had already been sacked. Whether the sacking was because he was a horrendous bigot against a cruelly abused minority group or because he was a brave truth-teller martyred for trying to warn students of a legitimate danger varied depending on the politics of the speaker. Of course, not all the rumors were exclusively about Lockhart. Quite a few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were discussing a rumor they'd overheard from Theo Nott and Daphne Greengrass suggesting that Lockhart was really at Hogwarts to investigate whether the Boy-Who-Lived had been replaced by some dark creature, thus explaining his recent scandalous conduct.

After the evening meal, Jim made his way to Classroom 102. Inside, he found his brother ... along with all the other seven members of Team Protector.

"I hope you don't mind, Little Brother," Harry said easily, "but the way I see it, I wasn't the only one wronged by what you did. You spied on *everyone's* boggart-fears, so anything you have to say about it, you can say to them a well."

Jim sighed in annoyance. He should have expected Harry would to do ... *something*. And now, the intimate brother-to-brother apology he'd planned would be made in front of an audience from a cross-section of the school, most of whom actively disliked him. He took a deep breath and dove in. It was a long rambling apology, but it was genuine. The Hufflepuffs seemed to buy it, at least. Ten minutes later, everyone left except Jim and Harry, though Neville and Flint both looked like they would have stayed behind had Harry not reassured them that he'd be okay. Jim grimaced and bit down on his anger. "*Honestly*," he thought, "*they act like I'm going to stab him or something once they're gone!*"

Harry studied his brother for a moment. "I'd like to congratulate you, Jim, on how heartfelt your apology seemed to be. I don't know if you're sincere, but if not, you fake it well."

"It was sincere, Harry, I ... I didn't want things to go down like they did. I wanted to scare you a bit. Scare you and embarrass you in front of some classmates. I never wanted to actually hurt you."

Harry nodded. "Just scare and embarrass me. Right. Like that makes it okay."

"Oh, come on, Harry. You've gotten your licks in on me this year. You know you have. I spent a whole day last week with green and silver hair."

"Believe it or not, that wasn't me."

"Yeah, right. Like the Leprechaun crown wasn't you, either?"

"Nope. I know this is impossible for you to believe, Jim, but my world doesn't revolve around you, and I've been rather

busy this year. I've only ever played one prank on you, and that was the fake cloak from last Easter."

"Oh *please!* Every prank that's been pulled on me this year has been tagged with SRGD! That's your calling card!"

"That's ... What?! I don't *have* a calling card! What does that even mean, anyway?"

Jim stared at Harry in consternation. "Slytherins Rule? Gryffindors Drool? Any of that ringing a bell?"

Harry stared for a second and then laughed. "Oh, *that!* You know, I'd forgotten all about that! I mean, a *lot* has happened for me since last Easter, Little Brother." Harry thought for a second. "Ah! And I guess GRSD is short for '*Gryffindors Rule. Slytherins Drool.*'" He snorted. "So your dungbomb prank was derivative as well as juvenile. That's ... kinda funny, if only unintentionally."

"Whatever," Jim said angrily. "Look, Harry. Whether those were your pranks or not, the fact remains: I played a prank that got you hurt, but as a result, I'm a pariah in my House and I have a month of detentions. Can't we just ... call it even?"

Harry actually did a double-take at that. "You ... hurt me, and then got punished for it. And that's ... even to you?! Amazing."

"Dammit, Harry!"

Harry raised a hand as if to placate the boy. "Alright, alright. I won't lift a finger to help you repair your reputation, but if you do nothing else to me or any other Slytherin, I won't retaliate for what you've done so far. Honestly, I find the idea of a prank war ... tedious. I can't for

the life of me see why you Gryffindors enjoy them." He walked up close to Jim. "*But* if you play one more stupid prank on me or any of my friends, I swear to Merlin and Morgana that I will respond with everything I have. You won't see it coming. You'll never prove it was me. But whatever I do will haunt you till the end of your days. Got it?"

Jim nodded at the threat. Harry shook his head almost contemptuously and left the room. Despite everything, Jim sighed in relief. Harry seemed sincere about agreeing to a truce. With that out of the way, Jim only had one thing left to do.

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Twenty minutes before curfew, Jim crept into the DADA classroom. It was empty this time of night, empty and dark. Stealthily (or at least as stealthily as Jim could manage without the benefits of an invisibility cloak), the boy made his way across the room to the storage closet in the back corner. A whispered *Alohomora* unlocked the closet door, and then, with some grunting effort, Jim was able to pull the trunk housing the boggart out of the closet and into the main classroom. He spent a few moments staring at the trunk with trepidation. Then, he took a deep breath, pointed his wand at the trunk, and said "***ABIERTO.***"

He was expecting Voldemort, whether sticking out of the back of an undead Quirrell's head or in some other form. He'd admitted to himself that it *might* be Harry, through he wasn't sure what that said about either him or his brother. But what Jim was *not* expecting was for his boggart to rise up out of the trunk and assume the form of *Hermione Granger*. Specifically, a Hermione Granger sporting the most venomous smirk he'd ever seen on a fellow Gryffindor.

"You know, I just had the **funniest** notion!" she said in a voice that dripped with contempt for him. "Wouldn't it be **amusing** if, for all this time, it had been **Harry** who destroyed You-Know-Who? And the reason your parents sent him to his Muggle relatives was to keep him hidden away while they put **you** forward and made you famous just to **hide** the fact that Harry was the real Boy-Who-Lived?" Then, not-Hermione started to laugh.

Jim's hand started to tremble slightly. Why was *this* his boggart? He slashed his wand angrily.

**"RIDIKKULUS!"**

The boggart didn't disappear. Instead, it transformed itself into Neville Longbottom. "*It's easy to laugh at other people's fears, Potter, when you've never faced your own. You've been given every advantage, while Harry's fought for every scrap he has, and he's still better than you in every way that I think matters. Frankly, Potter, as '**Boys-Who-Lived**' go, you've been a bit of a disappointment.*"

**"RIDIKKULUS!"** Jim shouted a good bit louder. The boggart changed again, this time into someone whose appearance caused Jim's voice to catch in his throat.

"You're **not good enough!**" said Lily Potter. "*You're wasting time on games and pranks when Voldemort's out there getting stronger. You have to try **harder**. Because if you fail, we'll all **die**. And it will be **your** fault!*"

**"RI-RIDIKKULUS!"**

"You should be working on finding out your secret power," said a disapproving James Potter. "*Merlin knows you couldn't possibly defeat Voldemort on your own without some kind of magical advantage. I mean ... look at you!*"

**"RI-sob-RIDIKKULUS!"** Jim could barely get the incantation out over his sudden overpowering emotions. His wand hand shook uncontrollably, and as the boggart changed one last time, the magic word died on his lips.

*"It should have been **me**,"* said Harry Potter with a malicious confidence. *"**I** should have been the Boy-Who-Lived. Like Neville said, I'm **better** than you in every way that matters. And if I **had** been the Boy-Who-Lived and been blessed with your advantages, Voldemort would already be **gone**. Instead, all our hopes rest on a miserable failure who can't even manage a boggart let alone a Dark Lord. **Pitiful!**"*

Jim staggered back and fell as not-Harry started laughing at his distress. The laughter continued as Jim picked himself up and ran out of the classroom. Then, the instant the door closed, not-Harry abruptly stopped laughing and then dissolved once more into a fog-that-was-not-a-fog. The boggart flowed back into its trunk, and the lid slammed itself shut with a mighty thud. After a few seconds, the last echoes died away, and finally the classroom was silent once more.

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: The Boggart Pt 2 is easily the longest chapter I've done so far, mainly because Lockhart's rant fell right in the middle and so there was no good place to cut. Besides, it's been pointed out to me that the pace of Year Two is a bit slow. This is the 23rd chapter of Secret Enemy and we're not out of September yet! Halloween will accelerate things, I promise (as Halloween always does in Harry Potter stories). So consider this extra long chapter a Thanksgiving present. :)

AN 2: Are werewolves irredeemable monsters? We'll see. The whole point (for me anyway) of this fic was to subvert as many HP fanfic cliches as possible. One such trope that I consider overused is the idea that werewolves are a pitiful despised minority group that only follows Voldemort because wizarding society is so mean and bigoted towards them. Usually in such stories, this bigotry conflict changes overnight because (a) Lupin stops moping and claims the Alpha status that he deserves for being one of JKR's favorites and (b) someone, usually Harry, points out to everyone that werewolves who take their potion are harmless fluffy puppies, and all the stupid wizards who are irrationally hateful towards werewolves suddenly change their minds. Oh, and throw in lots of intra-pack politics brazenly cribbed from Werewolf: The Apocalypse.

While there are some good stories that make use of those themes (A Marauder's Plan by CatsAreCool and Were's Harry by DobbyElfLord, both of which I like even though they've been quiet for a while), I wanted to do something else. Now, Gilderoy is not a reliable narrator on the topic of werewolves. You'll find out more later, but for now, let's just say that the Wagga Wagga Werewolf was the moment everything changed for Gilderoy Lockhart. Right now, our DADA instructor feels towards werewolves sort of like how Mad-Eye Moody feels towards, well, everything. But this raises an important point: why should people become accepting of werewolves just because a potion now allows them to retain their awareness during the full moon when that is the only time they can infect other people? If you think about it, a transformed werewolf in control of his faculties may be more dangerous to the public.



Finally, all of this will probably raise questions about "where's Remus"? All I can say is (a) he's coming, (b) he will not be an insane cannibal, (c) he may or may not be the DADA instructor, and (d) he will be much more ambiguous than he was in canon.

AN 3: Of course Slytherin Harry will not be drawn into a prank war. He played one prank on Jim in Year One (Slytherin Maneuvers pt 2) to blow off steam during that rather stressful Easter break but has since moved on to bigger things. And why should he waste his time with pranks against Jim? Right now, Jim is nearly as ostracized as canon-Harry was when everyone thought he was the Heir of Slytherin ... and it's not even October yet!

AN 4: "Power wears out those who cannot hold it" is from Godfather Pt 3. Other than "Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in," it was the only memorable line from the movie.

# **Family Dysfunctions (Pt 1)**

## **CHAPTER 24: Family Dysfunctions (Pt 1)**

***27 October 1992***

Somewhat surprisingly, Jim's month long detention passed without incident other than the boy's obvious signs of exhaustion. Rather stoically, he'd incorporated ten hours of detention spent mainly scrubbing various parts of the castle into his weekly schedule without dropping anything else, including schoolwork, twelve hours of Quidditch practice, five hours of ping pong practice (he was getting rather good at the game), and two hours spent on exercise every morning. He also became more diligent in his studies and actually regained almost half the fifty points his prank had cost Gryffindor House. Unbeknownst to anyone else, he also continued to spend an hour a day meditating on the exercises contained in the Occlumency book he'd gotten from Peter Pettigrew. Those exercises helped him remain calm in the face of the hostility he still drew from his fellow students, but he had to visit Madame Pomfrey three times for potions to soothe the burning sensation he now continually felt in his stomach and chest. He had also taken to discreetly purchasing Pepper-Up Potions and Calming Draughts from an enterprising Seventh Year Ravenclaw who was happy to brew such potions in his spare time if the price was right.

Ironically, it was for Harry that the month of October suddenly became more stressful. The week after the boggart incident, he met again with Snape and his mother for lunch. However, while she had been content with small talk and personal questions of a mundane nature during their first meeting, the second saw the woman diving

headfirst into some very probing questions about how the Dursleys had treated Harry. Admittedly, the questions were presented in a style that Gryffindors might consider subtle, but to any Slytherin worthy of the name, they were blunt and invasive. Halfway through the meal, Harry made an excuse to leave early. He also made excuses to avoid every subsequent request by his mother for follow-up lunches. Eventually, Harry finally approached Snape who, with some embarrassment, admitted that he had revealed to Lily Potter the existence of an auror's report about his last night with the Dursleys, one James Potter had apparently concealed from her. Snape and Harry both assumed that her sudden interest in his upbringing meant she now knew that he had been intentionally thrown out into a doxy swarm by the head of the family in whose care *she* had left the boy all those years ago. While Harry's vindictive side took a certain amount of pleasure in whatever guilt Lily might feel over the matter, his more pragmatic side did not want Lily or anyone else looking too closely into what might have influenced Vernon in his homicide attempt.

On October 25th, Jim's detention ended. With obvious reluctance, McGonagall returned his cloak, admonishing the boy that if he were caught using it without a very, very, *very* good reason, he would earn a historic number of point deductions. She also advised Jim that Mr. Filch now knew of his cloak and that Mrs. Norris would likely be able to detect him even if he were invisible. He accepted her comments gracefully and passed the news about Filch and Mrs. Norris on to his friend Ron who shook his head once more at the unfairness of it all.

Today, both Harry and Jim were summoned to the Headmaster's office just after their DADA class ended - apparently, Lockhart had not been sacked over "the werewolf lecture" after all. The password, to Harry's

bemusement, was "Jelly Babies." Dumbledore's sweet tooth and its effects on his password choices were well-known among the Slytherins. The two entered his office together, and they were both surprised to see Lily and James Potter present along with McGonagall and Snape. All of them, including the Headmaster, looked rather grim.

"Thank you both for coming so promptly. Harry, Jim, please take a seat." The old man gestured to two empty chairs. As he sat, Harry examined everyone's faces. Snape's, of course, was an impassive mask, but everyone else showed signs of varying degrees of emotional strain. Finally, Dumbledore spoke.

"Harry, we asked you here today to discuss some matters pertaining to the Dursleys."

The boy stiffened, his Occlumency shields smoothing his own face down into a mask of self-control that mirrored his Head of House. "I don't see what's necessary to discuss, sir. I assume that everyone here has some knowledge of how the Dursleys treated me. But I don't live with them anymore, and I'll be perfectly content to not ever think of them again."

"I fully understand that, my boy," Dumbledore said.

"However, we all felt it important to make you aware of ... recent events."

"Recent events, sir?" he said suspiciously.

Dumbledore nodded over in James's direction, and the younger man addressed his son with obvious reluctance.

"Harry ... Vernon Dursley passed away late last night."

There was a yawning chasm of silence that lasted for almost four full seconds, interrupted only the soft whirring of various devices and doodads on the shelf behind Dumbledore's desk.

"... What?" Harry said in a flat voice.

"It appears to have been a second heart attack, Harry," Lily said. "He was ... a very sick man who nearly died after his first attack in July. And it seems that he didn't do a good enough job of following his doctor's orders about taking care of himself, particularly where his medication was concerned. This is actually fairly common among older Muggle heart attack patients, and especially obese ones."

"You said it *appears* to have been a heart attack," Harry said in a low quiet voice. "Has he been checked for ... other causes?"

James and Lily looked at each other for a second before James spoke. "Yes, Harry. In light of ... your history with him, I thought it best to arrange a discreet magical examination of the body. He shows no signs of curses or hexes, nor any signs of magical poisons or potions of any kind. Diagnostic spells simply show that he failed to take his medication as he should have, which is vitally important for Muggle patients with his symptoms and history. And there would have been signs if his failure to take his medication was due to a Confundus or an Imperius."

Harry said nothing. Finally, Lily spoke once more.

"Harry, about your last ... encounter with Vernon. The auror who interviewed Vernon said..." She paused and looked at James helplessly. He seemed just as tongue-tied. Harry steeled himself mentally and then sliced the Gordian Knot in two.

"On the 4th of July, Vernon Dursley tried to murder me. I was already safe inside the house's wards when the doxies got to it, but the sight of them clawing at the windows frightened the Dursleys and caused Vernon to go berserk. He hit me hard enough to nearly knock me unconscious and then threw me out the back door to be stung to death and then devoured. Any questions?"

Save Snape, the other adults simply stared at Harry in total shock for the matter-of-fact way in which he laid out the facts. Jim was left speechless with his mouth hanging open.

"Why ... why didn't you tell us any of this?" said James in horror.

Harry shrugged. "Whatever our ... relationship, I saw no upside to dragging the House of Potter into a scandal, which is what would have happened if it had gotten out that Lord and Lady Potter left their Heir with abusive Muggles who eventually tried to kill him in one of the most painful ways to die known to the wizarding world. I survived. I was completely healed. And I would never have to go back there again. So I let it go." Harry fixed his father with a firm gaze. "Which I *assumed* you *knew* since you had access to the auror report."

James swallowed and glanced at his wife who was visibly angry with him. "You're right. I knew most of the details, though I left that part out when I told Lily and Jim."

"*Dad!*" exclaimed Jim in shock.

"I'm sorry, son, but Harry was right. If the truth had gotten out, the scandal would have been all over the papers. When Harry never pressed the issue, I assumed that the trauma of the doxy attack had caused him to block out the memories, so I decided ... to let sleeping dogs lie, I guess."

He turned towards Harry. "So, now that we all know what we all know, what do you want to do about it, Harry?"

"I see no reason to do anything different... James." The man winced slightly at Harry's refusal to call him *dad*, but he wasn't particularly surprised. Evidently, Lily had discussed that with him. "Vernon is dead, and I see no reason to bring a scandal down on the family when there's not even a possibility of punishing the person responsible for my ... for my injuries. As long as I never have to set foot on Privet Drive again, the sleeping dogs can continue to lie as far as I'm concerned."

If Harry's cold pragmatism was upsetting to any of the adults in the room, none of them spoke of it, though Lily, McGonagall, and Dumbledore all looked at him with concern.

"Do... do you want to go to the funeral?" asked Lily hesitantly. "Maybe get some closure?"

Harry looked at Lily as if she'd gone insane. "Absolutely not. I don't need ... *closure* for Vernon Dursley."

"Harry," interrupted Jim uneasily. "He's your boggart-fear." Then, Jim flinched from glare Harry gave him. "I mean, maybe going to the funeral will help you get over your fear of him."

"Why? Are you all expecting a storm of doxies to come flying out of the casket at me?" Harry turned towards Dumbledore. "Headmaster, thank you for alerting me to these developments. Was there anything else we need to discuss?"

The old man sighed. "No, Harry. You're free to go."

Harry stood, nodded respectfully towards Snape and McGonagall, and left without another word. Once outside, he took a moment to calm and center himself. Nearby was a mirror hanging on the wall, and Harry paused to check his appearance. Then, he stopped and merely stared deeply into the reflection of his own green eyes.

"You killed him," he said softly to himself. "You might as well have slit his throat." Then, he took a deep shuddering breath and walked away.

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## ***29 October 1992***

"You want us to *what?!*" Astoria Greengrass asked in amazement.

"Look," replied Ginny. "I promised Luna I'd come, but it'll only be for an hour. After that, we can skip out and catch the end of the Halloween Feast."

"If Sir Whatshisname ..." said Amaryllis Wilkes.

"Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington," interrupted Ginny.

"... Whatever. Anyway, if he invited Luna Lovegood to his, and I can't believe I'm saying this, *Death Day Party*, and she asked you along as her 'plus one' or whatever, why do you need us to go with you?" Amy finished expectantly.

Ginny paused and then made a face. "Because except for us, it'll be all ghosts and it'll be kind of creepy. So I wanted some backup."

Amy smirked. "Yeah, that's what I thought, Weasley. I just wanted to hear you admit it. I'm in."



"You are?!" squeaked Astoria.

"Sure! It's Halloween!" replied Amy with a laugh. "What could be more appropriate than a Death Day Party full of all the castle's ghosts! Besides, like Weasley said. We'll be there an hour and then make the Halloween Feast. What could go wrong?"

Tori looked doubtful but eventually agreed. Ginny was pleased, although the way Amy said "*What could go wrong?*" suddenly reminded her uncomfortably of Blaise's constant lectures about the gods of irony.

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### ***30 October 1992***

On Friday, Harry and Theo made their way down to the edge of Black Lake where Neville was waiting under the tree that was their usual meeting spot. '

"What's up?" Harry said. "Theo said you wanted to talk to me about something personal."

"Yeah," said Neville with a wry smile. "Actually, the truth is ... Theo wanted *me* to talk to *you*. He said you were being moodier than normal since you heard about your uncle dying, and he thought you needed to speak to someone you could actually trust without all the Slytherin bullshit. His words, not mine."

Harry turned towards Theo, who merely shrugged. "It's the truth, isn't it?"

Harry frowned at his two best friends in annoyance, and then he sighed and sat down next to Neville.

"I'll leave you guys to it then," said Theo as he started to head back to the castle.

"Stay, Theo," said Harry. "I want you to hear this too. Honestly, I need to get this off my chest to ... somebody, and there's really only four classmates I trust here at Hogwarts. But Hermione doesn't know any Occlumency, and Blaise ... well, he's a friend, but his mum has some sort of weird prophetic agenda for me, so I can't trust him with anything really sensitive. And this ... is really sensitive."

Harry's best friends looked at each other. Then, Theo sat down on the other side of Harry who surrounded the trio with the most impressive privacy charms he knew before telling them *everything*. About how the Dursleys had treated him. About how *every* Muggle treated him. About how Vernon had deliberately tried to kill him with the doxies. About how, in Harry's mind, both Vernon's actions and his death were almost certainly the result of the stress of sharing a home with Harry and his mysterious fear-inducing aura.

"Harry," said Neville, "you can't think that way. Even if something's been done to you that affects Muggles, it can't have been anything *you* did. You must have been a baby when it started."

"I know, Nev," said Harry as he stared out at the lake, idly rubbing his scar. "But ... I hated Vernon Dursley for so long. There were times when I *wished* him dead. And now it's happened, but only after I learned that it may never have been his fault at all. I'll never know what the *real* Vernon was like or how he'd have treated me if I didn't have this... whatever it is." He turned to look at his friend. "And that's without addressing my M... I mean, Lily. How am I supposed to tell her that there's some ... defect in me that may have

driven her sister partially insane and may have killed her brother-in-law? And *should* I tell her while things are still so bad between me and James? I don't believe for a second that he's really accepting me. He *admitted* that he had Vernon's body checked for dark magic. I have to assume that if he'd found anything magical in Vernon's death, he'd try to pin it on me."

The trio was silent for a moment. Then, Theo spoke. "Harry, this ... condition you're talking about. Does Jim have it too?"

Harry looked at Theo in surprise. "I don't know. I've never seen Jim around Muggles for any length of time."

"Well it seems to me that if you *both* have it, James can't possibly claim it's something exclusively bad about *you*. Not to mention, I think it would be easier to find a cure or counterspell or whatever if the healers have a pair of twins to compare and study."

"Theo's right," said Neville excitedly. "If it affects him too, then it's probably some sort of Boy-Who-Lived thing that you just got caught up in. You said you can see the effects on Muggles almost immediately. See if you can arrange for Jim to talk with some Muggles for a few minutes and watch their responses."

"How I am I supposed to do that?" Harry asked irritably.

Neville shrugged. "I dunno. You're the Slytherin mastermind, not me."

Harry snorted. He'd consider his friends' suggestion. Perhaps over Christmas break, he could arrange such a meeting. In the meantime, it felt good to be able to talk to *someone* his own age.

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## ***31 October 1992***

### ***Halloween***

To Harry's surprise, it only took until Saturday to get some persuasive data. Just after breakfast, Jim came down wearing a Muggle-style suit that looked profoundly uncomfortable on him. He was joined in the foyer by Lily Potter, who was wearing a conservative black Muggle dress. The two left to walk to Hogsmeade where they would join James, and then the three would apparate together to Vernon's funeral. That Vernon Dursley's funeral was on Halloween was strangely appropriate in Harry's opinion.

When the trio returned two hours later, Jim was sporting a black eye.

Apparently, they'd been at the funeral service for less than two minutes when Dudley saw Jim, assumed he was Harry, and screamed out "MUM! THE FREAK'S HERE!" loud enough for the whole room to hear. Despite the Potters' protests that Jim was not Harry and that Harry chose not to come, Vernon's grieving sister Marge started screaming obscenities and moved to strike Jim with her cane. Things quickly spiraled out of control, and the Potters were forced to withdraw, but not before Jim and his father both took some licks, including a haymaker punch to the head for Jim courtesy of his hysterical and brutish cousin.

After returning from Madame Pomfrey, Jim relayed the whole sordid affair to the Gryffindor Common Room, and Neville quietly passed the information on to Harry while on the way to dinner. Harry was thoughtful the rest of the day as he contemplated the news. Though he didn't say so to Neville, there was a part of him ("*The Nidhogg part of my brain*," as he called it) that really wanted to see a pensieve memory of the whole fracas.

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That evening, the Halloween Feast lived up to its usual hype, though Harry was surprised that Ginny, Amy and Astoria were absent. Harry was also surprised when Ron showed up slightly out of breath just after the food appeared. Given the boy's eating habits, he was usually already waiting with knife and fork in each hand and with his mouth hanging open long before the food arrived. Other than that, the meal passed without incident, and at its conclusion, the students left to head back to their dorms, which was when the strangeness started.

Most of the students' paths out of the Great Hall led them past a set of stairs leading up to the First Floor, stairs which were now flooding with water coming from a disused lavatory on the floor above. And from that direction, Harry could hear the sounds of shouting, some of which was coming from his three missing firsties. Bounding up the stairs and round the corner (with several classmates following behind), he found Ginny, Amy, and Tori huddled together and trying to put on a brave face while being harangued and threatened with torture by an enraged Argus Filch.

"MONSTERS! MURDERERS! KILLERS OF CATS!" he ranted.

"We didn't kill *anything*!" Ginny yelled back furiously. "Mrs. Norris was like that when we got here!"

"LIES! MRS. NORRIS NEVER DID NOTHING TO ANY OF YOU! YOU ALL JUST HAVE TO BREAK THE RULES ALL THE TIME!"

At that point, Harry noticed that the poor feline was apparently dead or at least very, very stiff, and suspended

by a cord from the ceiling. He also noticed in the dim light some writing on the wall behind the cat. It looked like a dark red paint – or at least, Harry *hoped* it was paint – and spelled out the following cryptic message:

**THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED!  
ENEMIES OF THE HEIR BEWARE!**

and below that in even larger letters

**SLYTHERINS RULE!**

Harry glanced around and noticed that Jim and Ron had moved up to stand next to him and take in the scene.

"Anything you want to share, Little Brother?" he asked mildly.

Jim looked back and forth between the writing and his brother. "What? This wasn't me, Harry, I swear! I'm *done* with pranks. I promise."

"Mm-hmm," Harry said noncommittally. Then, both brothers were distracted by a rude laugh from a few feet away.

"Ha-ha! Enemies of the Heir *beware!*" laughed Draco. "You'll be next ..." he stopped abruptly, coughed and then pulled at his collar, "enemies ... of the Heir... whoever you are!"

Harry rolled his eyes. By that point, Dumbledore, Snape and Lockhart had made their way to the front to examine the cat. Then, the Headmaster moved to console the man.

"Mr. Filch, Mrs. Norris is not dead, but merely petrified. She can be restored through a potion that Professor Snape can prepare from distilled Mandrake root just as soon as

the Mandrakes growing in the green houses reach maturity. As for these young ladies, I assure you that whatever force petrified your cat was well beyond the skill of any First Year. Indeed beyond the skill of most Seventh years."

At that point, Luna Lovegood came around the opposite corner, stopped, and took in the scene, which included a crying man clutching a petrified cat, a wall covered in a threatening message possibly written in blood, and a large mass of Hogwarts students with expressions ranging from curiosity to horror. She winced slightly as her eyes passed over Harry and Jim standing next to one another. Then, she turned to her three Slytherin friends.

"I see why you left early," she said brightly. "This looks *much* more exciting than Sir Nicholas's poetry reading."

Soon after, the Headmaster commanded that all the students return to their dorms for the evening. As they left, Lockhart pulled Dumbledore and Snape aside.

"How much distilled Mandrake root is required for the depetrification potion?" he asked.

"It varies," replied Snape, "according to body weight. For a human, from four to six drams depending on size. For a cat, one dram will likely suffice, though we have none at all in stock."

"I have five drams," Lockhart responded. "I keep it on hand for my lectures about pixies and other creatures with paralytic attacks, though this appears to be much more ... aggressive than any of the creatures I'd prepared for."

"We would be appreciative of your donation, Gilderoy," said Dumbledore. "It would mean a great deal to Mr. Filch if

Mrs. Norris can be restored immediately instead of months from now."

"Well, Headmaster, that's the thing," said Lockhart after looking around to be sure no one was listening. "Do you really want to use my limited supply now on Filch's cat? Or are we sure that this isn't going to happen again? Only next time with *a student*?"

Dumbledore and Snape merely looked at one another pensively.

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***Thirty minutes later...***

Harry stopped in front of the entrance to the Prince's Lair with Draco, Blaise, Theo, Missy and Marcus all following behind him.

"Moldy Shorts!" Harry said authoritatively.

Draco looked at him sharply. "Really?!"

"I'm sorry, Draco," Harry replied testily as he crossed through the black entryway into the Lair. "Does my lack of respect for your father's old boss offend you?"

Draco said nothing as Harry walked around the table and flicked his wand towards the fireplace. In response, the enchanted logs within burst into flame. Then, he and everyone else took a seat, leaving the Hydra Throne empty. Harry turned to face his classmate.

"So, Draco, here we are again. Of course, I can easily change that password if you don't see any benefits to having access to this room."



Draco looked around at the massive library. According to Harry, most of the books were still warded against touch, but not all. Of course, the books were only a practical benefit. Even a fool could see that this room was where all the power in Slytherin House would reside, at least as long as Harry Potter was around to command it. "Go on."

"The Heir. What do you know?"

Draco's eyes widened. "You *don't* know about the Heir of Slytherin? Remarkable, considering how you've been lording your princely status over us all."

"No, Draco. I've just been lording my natural superiority over you and the other Death Eater spawn. As far as most people are concerned, I'm a kick-ass Chaser and all-around smart-ass who's otherwise flying under the radar." Draco's forehead creased in confusion at the mention of "*radar*."

Harry sighed. "*Never mind*. Let's just say that I'm generally discreet in my actions, a concept which is still beyond you. I mean *seriously*?! Would you *really* have blurted out '*You'll be next, Mudbloods!*' in front of three professors and dozens of fellow students if you hadn't taken an *Unbreakable Vow* forbidding it?!"

Draco blushed slightly at having his lack of discretion pointed out. Meanwhile, Harry turned his attention from Draco to the vacant throne to his left. Then, he hissed loudly at it, and the Hydra's nine heads sprang to life. To everyone but Harry, it was still a startling display. Harry conversed with several of the heads – mainly the cobra and the three-headed runespoor, it seemed – for about a minute before turning back to his fellow Slytherins.

"Right, the Hydra's never heard of anyone who claims '*the Heir of Slytherin*' as a title. In fact, the runespoor is quite

certain that there hasn't been a student who could legally claim to be one of Salazar Slytherin's heirs since 1588. Also, something about King Phillip II and the Spanish Armada. Blaise, could you do a bit of research on that in the next day or so?"

"On it," Blaise said as he pulled out some parchment and made himself a note.

"Now then, Draco, do you have anything *useful* to add?" asked Harry with some asperity.

Draco started to say something insulting but then thought better of it. "There was a story my mother told me when I was a child. When my grandfather Abraxas Malfoy was at Hogwarts, there were a number of ... incidents in which several Mud ... *Muggle-borns* were attacked, and eventually one was killed. There were no more incidents after that. According to the story, the attacks were by a monster that had been left by Salazar Slytherin in a secret room called the Chamber of Secrets so that one day his rightful heir could use it to purge the school of ... Muggleborns." He hesitated and thought. "Obviously, though, that's inconsistent with the man *you* say that Salazar Slytherin was."

"Yes," said Harry firmly. "Yes, it is." He turned back to the Hydra and hissed back and forth with it some more. Towards the end, Harry's hissing became a bit heated, and in response, the runespoor's responses became noticeably aggressive. Then, Harry turned back to the group.

"Hmm. Apparently, there *is* or at least *was* a Chamber of Secrets, but information about it is limited to actual Princes. I don't have full access, so the Hydra won't tell me anything

beyond the fact of the Chamber's existence. Draco, when did these events from your grandfather's story take place."

Draco thought for a moment. "Late 30's to early 40's, I suppose."

Harry stood up and examined the list of prior Princes. "The Throne was vacant from 1914 to 1943, but the last Chamber opening might have been during the tenure of ... Tom Marvolo Riddle." He paused and then looked around the group. "Anyone recognize that name? Riddle's not a Pureblood name, is it?" No one else had heard of any wizards named Riddle. "Right, Theo, while Blaise is doing legal research, I'd appreciate it if you hit the old *Prophet* records, from 1937 through 1943. Merlin knows this school hides its secrets, but surely if a student *died* at the hands of a mysterious creature, it would have made the papers."

Theo nodded and took notes of his own while Harry moved back to his seat. "Now then. It seems to me that there's two possibilities. Either someone is actively trying to make Slytherin House look bad. Or some idiot is *unintentionally* working to make the House look bad. So let's figure out what this is all about and put a stop to it before it gets serious. Questions?"

"Are we sure it's not the Git-Who-Lived?" asked Flint. "I mean, '*Slytherin Rules*' is the sort of crap he'd use in a prank to frame us for it."

Harry shrugged. "He's on my short list, but he denies it, and he's a terrible liar. Also, Dumbledore said that whatever petrified the cat had some powerful and highly illegal magic behind it, and I don't think that describes Jim at all. I'm thinking it's one of the dumber Slytherins trying to

intimidate the other Houses, one of the dumber Gryffindors trying to make us look bad, one of the *smarter* Slytherins trying to frame Jim by leaving a clue so obvious that only an idiot would assume we did it, or one of the smarter *Gryffindors* trying to frame Jim the same way. He's made quite a few enemies in his own House lately."

"No Puffs or Claws?" Marcus asked.

Harry shook his head. "No Hufflepuff would perform a prank that involved petrifying a cat and hanging it up by its tail. And if a Ravenclaw figured out a petrification spell that flummoxed even Dumbledore, he wouldn't have used in a prank - he'd have published a journal article about it." The others laughed. "Anyway, we have a place to start, so let's get to it first thing tomorrow. Well, those of us not stuck doing ... say, what *does* Lockhart have everyone doing tomorrow?

"Cross-referencing the runic structure of a portkey and a banishment Charm," said Missy.

"Researching the history of Memory Charms in the 19th Century," said Blaise.

"Reviewing my happiest memories in a pensieve before we start Patronus work," said Marcus.

"Ping pong," said Draco almost bitterly.

Harry chuckled. "You sound disappointed, Draco, but I am *really* curious to see what the heck Lockhart is up to with that. Oh, and by the way, I was rough on you earlier, but thanks for your help tonight."

Draco's mouth twitched slightly. "Don't mention it. Anything for the House."

With that, the group broke up and headed to their respective rooms, leaving the Prince's Lair empty once more.

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## ***1 November 1992***

Just before dawn the next morning, Jim rose before his dorm-mates as was his practice. It was a Sunday, but the Hufflepuffs had the Quidditch pitch today, so for once, he had some early morning free time. Given the previous night's excitement, he'd decided that he would find Harry today and insist on doing something with his brother. After the drama of Vernon's funeral, Jim felt he had some insights into how awful it was for Harry to grow up with that family, and he wanted to do what he could to help Harry work past it. More importantly, he wanted to reassure his brother that he had nothing to do with that prank from the night before involving Filch's cat and the graffiti on the wall that implicated the Slytherins. Jim was sure that if the two pooled their resources, they could get to the bottom of the mystery quickly. Then, he laughed at the thought of Harry and himself getting together to solve a mystery. At last, they really were like the Hardy Boys.

As he got up to head to the bathroom, however, he noticed something odd. The lock on his trunk was open. He looked around the room. His fellow Gryffindors were all still asleep, even Ron, the loudest snorer of the five. Jim opened the trunk and lit up a Lumos with his wand to see if anything was missing. There was. Jim normally stored his father's invisibility cloak within a moleskin pouch at the bottom of his trunk. The pouch was now gone, and in its place was a piece of parchment that had been folded over and sealed. Slowly, he removed the paper and broke the seal. By the

light of his glowing wand, Jim read the message it contained.

*Dear Git-Who-Lived:*

*I so enjoyed your little prank last night. How you must have thrilled to see three little firsties (one of them your only real friend's little sister) cowering in fear of Argus Filch and nearly in tears over your handy work. Such a fine specimen of Gryffindor chivalry.*

*Anyway, since it's now clear that your lack of honor is exceeded only by your lack of style, I thought it best to deprive you of your number one pranking aid, lest you embarrass our family name any further. Good luck proving it was me.*

*Sincerely,*

*You-Know-Who*

*P.S. Slytherins Rule. Gryffindors Drool.*

*P.P.S. Poof!*

As Jim read to the very last word, there was indeed a sudden *poof* as the letter in his hand disappeared in a gout of green flame. Jim stood there, still with a glowing wand in one hand, as he stared down into the trunk where his family's heirloom cloak was supposed to be. His gripped his wand so tightly that his knuckles cracked. Then, he pushed that anger within him deep down into the pit of his stomach like the Occlumency book said. This time, however, he was surprised to find that there was just no more room, and the slow burning brush pile he'd been maintaining for weeks now suddenly ignited into a blazing inferno.

"I'll kill him," said the Boy-Who-Lived with an eerily calm voice that belied a rage that was already completely out of control.

# Family Dysfunctions (Pt 2)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 25: Family Dysfunctions (Pt 2)

Harry, Theo, and Blaise were headed towards the Great Hall for Sunday breakfast when they were accosted by Jim Potter, whose eyes were practically bloodshot with anger. Trailing behind him were most of the Second Year Gryffindors, half of whom seemed to be trying to calm him down while the rest were apparently just along for the show.

Before Harry could say anything, Jim was already in his face. "Look, I told you last night that I had *nothing* to do with that graffiti or the cat! I've *kept* my side of our truce! Now *give it back!*"

Harry blinked. "What in Merlin's name are you talking about, Little Brother?" He was mildly surprised when Jim practically growled at the phrase *Little Brother*; Harry had thought that Jim was immune to that little dig, but apparently it still had the power to annoy him after all.

"The *cloak*, Harry! I know you've got it. I know you think that's a cute way to get revenge on me. But you've had your laughs so *give it back!*" *Fire burning.*

At that, Harry did a double-take. "Someone *stole* a Potter family heirloom? No, let me rephrase that. You *let* someone steal a Potter family heirloom?"



Jim's whole face twitched violently. "I didn't let anyone do anything. You took it while I was asleep. And I *know* it was you because *you left a note gloating about it!*"

"Jim, calm down," said Neville urgently, but the boy ignored him. *Fire raging.*

"A *note*," said Harry disdainfully. "Why would I ever leave a note if I stole something from you?! That's ... amateur-level."

"GODDAMMIT, HARRY!" *Out of control.* By this point, a crowd was starting to gather. Inside the Great Hall, Professor Lockhart interrupted his discussion with Professor Sprout about Mandrakes to investigate the commotion.

"Jim," said Hermione, "Please. Get a hold of yourself."

"DON'T TELL ME TO CALM DOWN!" Jim bellowed. Instinctively, Hermione took a step back. *Pressure building.*

"And besides," said Harry with a hint of ice creeping into his voice, as he was now growing irritated with his brother's belligerence, "why would I need to *steal* the cloak when I've already proven I can just *trick you* into giving it to me whenever I need it?"

Jim's head snapped back around towards his brother. He was too angry to respond, too angry even to think about anything except the red haze that began to stain his vision.

*Boom.*

With a roar of unrestrained fury, Jim hurled himself at Harry before anyone could react, knocking the other boy to

the ground. Then, he began raining blows down on his brother's head while yelling incoherently at him.

"I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU! I WISH YOU'D STAYED WITH THE DURSLEYS AND DIED THERE!"

After a few seconds of shock, Neville and Theo each grabbed Jim by an arm and dragged him away off of Harry. Immediately, Jim's martial arts training kicked in, and he quickly threw the other two boys off of him and turned back to his brother. Instantly, he noticed three things. One, Harry's nose was bleeding. Two, Harry now had his wand in his hand. Three, Harry's eyes looked even greener than usual.

"**FLIPPENDO!**" the Slytherin intoned in an icy voice. The magic slammed into Jim, flinging him up into the air in a somersault to land hard on the marble some fifteen feet away. Instantly, both boys scrambled to their feet, Jim drawing his own wand as he did. Most of the students jumped back in surprise, but Neville actually planted himself between the twins with his arms extended towards each.

"STOP THIS! BOTH OF YOU!" he yelled. Neither Potter lowered his wand.

"I quite agree. **EXPELLIARMUS DUO!**" There was a flash of light, and both Harry and Jim's wands flew out of their respective hands to land at Professor Lockhart's feet. "Now, will someone explain to me *what in the name of Merlin's saggy Y-fronts IS GOING ON?!*"

"The Psycho-Who-Lived just attacked me, sir, and I defended myself," said Harry.

"Yes, with a jinx that could have broken your brother's neck, not to mention how many other students could have been hurt had he landed on them. And what's your excuse, Gryffindor Potter?"

"The snake stole something that belongs to me," said Jim.

"That's a lie!" interrupted Harry.

"Enough!" said Lockhart. He rubbed his forehead in annoyance. Then, he sent minor healing charms to both Harry and Jim, along with a Scourgify to clean away the blood off of Harry's shirt. "You two and I are taking this to the Headmaster's office. Now!" Then, the professor paused. "Oh, and Longbottom? One point to Gryffindor for bodily imposing yourself between two armed combatants in an effort to stop a fight. Courageous, but in the future, I'd recommend a Protego instead."

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Fifteen minutes later, the brothers were back in Dumbledore's office, along with Lockhart, McGonagall, Snape, and the boys' parents. James looked like he'd just woken up. Jim stared at the floor in a daze, as if he were coming out of a fugue state. Harry's Occlumency had reasserted itself, and his face was a bland mask that mirrored that of his Head of House.

"So, in summation, Jim," said the Headmaster, "you awoke this morning to discover that the Potter invisibility cloak was missing. You say that there was a letter left behind implicating your brother but it self-immolated. You then confronted your brother, and when you were unsatisfied with his response, you attacked him physically. Is that about the size of it?"

Jim nodded without looking up.

"Harry, do you have anything to add?"

"Only that, for the record, I *do not* have the cloak. To be honest, I'm somewhat *flattered* that Jim thinks I'm skilled enough to sneak across the school in the dead of night, bypass the security on Gryffindor Tower, and break into his trunk without waking Jim or any of his dorm-mates, but to repeat, I *do not* have the cloak." He turned towards James. "Although now that the topic's been raised, I am curious. *Is* the cloak magically entailed? Because if so, I would think there would be a few legal complications if you just up and gave it to your second son in place of your *Heir*."

James stiffened at the implied rebuke. "The cloak is entailed, Harry. Your rights to it will vest after you become Heir Apparent. Until then, it's mine to lend as I choose, and since Jim is the Boy-Who-Lived, I made the decision for safety reasons to lend it to him even though he's not the Heir."

"Mm-hmm. With the end result that he's lost a priceless Potter heirloom."

"I haven't *lost* it!" Jim said angrily. "It was *stolen*."

"Enough," said Dumbledore. "We will put the matter of the cloak aside for the moment. Right now, I am concerned with your punishments. Jim, you were punished very harshly last month after injuring your brother once. Now, you have done so again. Harry, I understand your impulse to defend yourself, but we have very strict rules against using magic to settle fights here at Hogwarts, rules that must be obeyed. Do you both understand?"

Jim nodded without answering.

"To be honest," said Harry, "It was less about defending myself than protecting Neville Longbottom and Theodore Nott. Jim apparently knows ... kung fu or whatever he's been learning."

"Taekwondo," Jim quietly corrected.

"Don't care," Harry snapped at him. "Anyway, he was fighting back against their efforts to hold him back, and I was worried that they would be hurt. That said, I realize now that the Incarcerous Spell would have been a far better and safer choice. I apologize for acting rashly and letting my anger get the better of me, and I will, of course, accept whatever punishment you think appropriate."

"Ahem," Lockhart spoke up. "As I was the professor on the scene who broke up the fight, Headmaster, might I request that both the boys be assigned detention with me? Clearly, polishing trophies and paintings for a month did not make a deep enough impression on the younger Potter. I have some thoughts on how I might help these two fine lads to overcome their differences."

Dumbledore looked towards McGonagall and Snape, neither of whom objected. "Very well, Gilderoy. I am assigning both the Potter Twins five hours of detention per week each for the next four weeks. *Afterwards*, Jim, since you were the instigator and this is the second time we've had to punish you over an attack against your brother, you will have additional detention for the remainder of the term. Boys, I sincerely hope that you will take this opportunity to seriously work through your differences. Brothers, and especially twins, should not suffer this degree of acrimony." From Dumbledore's tone, it sounded as if he had some experience with sibling rivalry. Jim continued to look down at the floor. Harry returned Dumbledore's gaze

impassively, as if to make it clear that he no longer had any interest whatsoever in "working through his differences" with Jim.

"Jim," said Dumbledore without his customary twinkle, "violence against a fellow student is *not acceptable* at Hogwarts. While Harry is receiving punishment for using a potentially dangerous jinx, it was nevertheless an act of self-defense that *you* provoked. Your association with this school will continue for now partly because after almost fifty years as Headmaster I have never expelled a student and partly because as the son of an Ancient and Noble House you benefit from certain privileges that most students lack. If there is another such incident, however, I will take this matter before the Board of Governors and seek suspension, if not outright expulsion. Do you understand?"

Jim nodded again. His eyes blinked repeatedly as if he were fighting back tears.

"Now then," the Headmaster continued, "as for the missing cloak. There will not be a Hogsmeade weekend before December, so no student will be able to leave campus without being detected by the wards. Thus, the cloak must still be on the premises. I will announce its disappearance at lunch and give the thief one week to return it. After that, there will be a search of the entire castle by both professors and the Hogwarts house elves. Anyone discovered with it then will have detention with Mr. Filch for the remainder of the school year plus a loss of fifty House points. Is that satisfactory, Lord Potter?"

From the look on James's face, it didn't seem very satisfactory, but he nevertheless nodded. With that, the disciplinary meeting ended.

Five minutes after that, Jim was in a boy's lavatory, vomiting into a toilet from stress.

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## ***2 November 1992***

The next night, Harry and Jim arrived for their first detention with the DADA instructor. To Harry's surprise, there was a ping pong table in the center of the room. He knew about Lockhart's odd obsession with the Muggle game (which he was aware of but had never played himself) and that the professor had made it the focal point of "Team Counterstrike," but he was surprised to see it a part of his detention.

"Ah, gentlemen, right on time. Now, Gryffindor Potter, you're familiar with this game, so I'll ask you to wait patiently for a few minutes while I explain the basics to Slytherin Potter." And with that, Lockhart spent a few minutes explaining the rules to a bemused Harry before playing a few practice rounds with him until he got a feel for the game.

"Do you think you've got the hang of it now, Slytherin Potter?" The boy nodded. "*Excellent!* Now there's just one final thing." With that, he pulled out his wand, touched it to the ping pong ball, and uttered a brief incantation. Then, he picked up his ping pong bat and made a fast serve to Harry before the boy could react. The ball slipped past Harry's defense, and instantly, he felt a quick jab of pain in his left buttock, as if someone had stabbed him with a pin.

"You'll both find that the ball now carries a minor curse on it. If your opponent scores a point on you, you'll experience a very mild Stinging Hex on a random point on your body. Not enough to harm or to even leave any lasting pain. Just

enough to be ... *annoying*." With that, he handed the bat off to Jim who gave Harry a predatory sneer.

"Sir," said Harry in a betrayed voice. "May I remind you that we're here because Jim physically assaulted me? And now you're giving him the opportunity to torture me as part of my detention?! He's been practicing this game since September! This is totally unfair!"

Jim sniggered at that, but Lockhart simply stared up at the ceiling while tapping his chin thoughtfully with his wand, as if he were considering the matter. "Hmm. I suppose you do have a point about that, Slytherin Potter." Then, Lockhart flicked out his wand and tapped it against Jim's bat. The bat transfigured in Jim's hand until, to his own surprise, he was holding a narrow ten-inch rod with a much smaller paddle at the end, one that was no more than three or four inches in diameter. Now, it was Jim's turn to look betrayed and Harry's to look like a predator.

"Begin!" the professor said. The boys commenced an hour-long session of ping pong, punctuated by grunts, hisses and whispered expletives whenever a point was scored against either of them. Initially, Harry held the upper hand, and he took cruel delight every time Jim flinched in response to the Stinging Hex. After thirty minutes, Harry's own grunts of pain were growing more frequent, and he finally figured out why: his bat was shrinking.

"Um, Professor Lockhart? Is there something I should know about my bat?"

"Ah, you've finally noticed! Yes, Slytherin Potter. Your bat is enchanted so that at certain intervals, it will shrink slightly until eventually it matches the dimensions of your brother's bat. The level of shrinkage is determined by how many



unanswered points you score on your brother, but points don't count against you unless Gryffindor Potter is actively trying his best to return each serve. That way, he can't just let you win in order to shrink your bat down to his size." Both brothers glared at Lockhart who simply smiled back at them. "I've always found that sibling rivalry can be a powerful motivational tool, don't you agree? *ha-Ha!*"

The twins continued playing for another twenty minutes until their detention was over for the evening, but both were quite perturbed to realize that this would be a nightly occurrence for them over the rest of the month. Harry and Jim left without speaking to one another.

As soon as the door closed, Lockhart waited for a few seconds and then cast a Finite at the back corner of the room, dispelling the Disillusionment Charm that had shielded his guest from the Potter Twins' view.

"Well, Miss Lovegood? What are your observations?"

Luna Lovegood looked up from the notes she'd been quietly taking for the last hour. "There's something wrong with Jim. Actually, I think there's something wrong with both of them, but something's *really* wrong with Jim. It's like there's one giant wrackspurt in the pit of his stomach that's growing fatter and fatter on the fury-flies that he's been dropping down his own gullet to feed it."

Lockhart stared at the young Gryffindor, giving no sign as to whether her words troubled or merely confused him.

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## ***6 November 1992***

After his first detention, Harry grabbed every chance he could to practice ping pong, shanghaiing Draco, Cedric,

Justin and anyone else in Team Counterstrike with whom he had the slightest relationship to help him quickly master the game. Jim might have had an extra month of practice, but Harry had far better connections. Indeed, Jim's reputation at this point was so poor that most of Team Counterstrike refused to practice with him, and he was forced to teach Ron the game just to have someone to play against in his spare time. Harry also spent time pumping Justin for ideas on how best to practice alone. Although mildly annoyed to have one more person bugging him for ping pong tips, Justin considered Harry a good friend. More importantly, while the rest of Team Counterstrike was eager to have Justin as a tutor-slash-partner, Harry was the first person to come to him for self-teaching tips, and for that matter, the first person clever enough to ask about things like putting spin on the ball without Justin explaining the concept first. Justin was also grateful for the advance warning about "shrinking ping pong bats," so he was not overly surprised when he showed up for a practice round to find that his own bat (like those of several other of the better players) was reduced in size to match Jim's. While Draco and Cho groaned at the added difficulty, Justin was quite delighted at how magic could take his game play to the next level.

By Friday, Harry was annoying half the Slytherin dorm by walking everywhere while constantly bouncing a ping pong ball on a piece of wood transfigured into a bat shaped like Jim's. He'd also gotten Flint to transfigure the table in the Prince's Lair into a ping pong table. The runespoor was outraged, but the other snakes were oddly amused, particularly the krait once Harry explained about his detentions and the fact that he could inflict actual (if minor) pain on his brother by beating him in a competition. Nidhogg greatly approved of what it referred to as "dominance games."

Harry's study group met on Friday. Before sitting down, Harry passed a parchment to Justin. "A little something to pay you back for all your help this week," he said.

Justin opened the parchment and crooked an eyebrow. "Ablenken?"

Harry smiled. "Ablenken is an obscure German Charm from the mid-19th Century. I found the basic spell in ***Quidditch Through the Ages*** a few days back and adapted it. The original idea was that you could enchant a Beater's bat to function on its own for pickup games in which there weren't enough people to cover both Beater's positions.

Unfortunately, it didn't work well for that purpose, since the enchanted bat couldn't move as fast as a player on a broom. But it works *quite* well on a small bat-like object that only has to move a few feet to parry something headed towards it. You can also use it for fencing and I'm pretty sure for tennis if you're interested in that. And it parries with the same level of skill as the wizard who cast it, so basically, you can play ping pong against yourself."

Justin grinned in delight. "That's *brilliant*, Harry!"

"All I ask is that you don't share it with Jim... or with anyone who *might* share it with Jim."

Justin tapped the tip of his nose with his finger. "Right-O."

"Ahem," said Hermione. "If we can move on from ping pong follies, we have a lot to cover today."

With that, the group spent the next two hours reviewing the course material covered so far that week. At the end, Hermione asked if anyone had any questions, and naturally, the topic of the Chamber of Secrets came up.

"Well," she began, " we managed to get Professor Binns talking about the Chamber of Secrets on Wednesday. He said that the Chamber itself is a myth but there were some incidents back in 1943 in which several students were petrified in some unknown fashion. There were rumors that it was due to some creature known as Slytherin's Monster which was unleashed by the so-called Heir of Slytherin, but it was never definitively proven. One student died and the petrifications stopped after that. Does anyone have anything to add?"

Theo glanced at Harry who nodded. Then, he began to speak. "Actually, we found some additional information in the bound *Daily Prophet* issues from that era. The names of the affected students were not provided, but four students, all Muggleborn, were petrified between January and March of 1943. A fifth Muggleborn was both petrified and killed, and she was the last victim. It was a female Ravenclaw, but her name was omitted, supposedly out of respect for the victim's family. The newspaper accounts speculate that the whole thing was just a series of pranks perpetrated against Muggleborns, most likely by a bigoted Pureblood. *The Prophet* at that time had swung around to being relatively pro-Muggleborn and anti-Pureblood because of the Grindelwald Conflict, and the girl's death was believed to have been an accidental result of a Pureblood prank gone wrong. The papers also say that an unnamed Third Year Gryffindor was expelled not long after the girl's death. The articles do a good job of insinuating that the expelled student was the one responsible for the petrifications without coming out and saying it."

"A Gryffindor?" exclaimed Anthony Goldstein. "Who was also the Heir of Slytherin? How does that work?"

Theo shrugged. "The Sorting Hat sorts however it chooses. I don't think there's any guarantee that the descendant of a Founder will end up in that Founder's House."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Susan Bones rather archly. "Frankly, I can't imagine how Zacharias Smith got into Hufflepuff *except* by being descended from our Founder."

"Be that as it may," said Hermione, "if we take the writing on the wall across from the 1st Floor girls' lavatory at face value, then there's an Heir of Slytherin among us who has access to the same petrification technique used in 1943, whether it's a curse or some creature. Harry, if anyone knows, I'd expect it to be you. Does Slytherin have any heirs who might be at Hogwarts?"

Harry smiled. "I'll defer to Blaise, who has been researching that question since Sunday."

Blaise took a second to organize his notes. "Well, the first thing to understand is that, *of course*, Salazar Slytherin had heirs. The man died in the 11th Century at the age of 187 having outlived three wives by whom he had sixteen legitimate children plus an undetermined number of bastards. Of the legitimate children, seven were girls who would have married into other families, but the boys would have preserved the family name which, in fact, endures to the present day."

"If that's so," asked Padma, "why haven't there been any students named Slytherin to attend Hogwarts for the last four centuries? I've looked into that and there's no record of any students with that surname at Hogwarts since late 16th century."

"Right," Blaise continued. "Specifically since 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada."

"The *what?*" asked Hermione in surprise.

"In 1588, King Philip II of Spain attempted to invade and conquer England with what was at that time the largest naval armada in history. Through a variety of factors – bad planning, unexpected weather, and magical intervention from English wizards and witches – the invasion failed."

"I know all *that!*" she said testily. "Well... not the part about *magical intervention*, but the story of the Armada, definitely! British Muggleborn, remember? But what does it have to do with the Slytherin family?"

"Well, what Muggleborns probably *don't* know is that before the imposition of the Statute of Secrecy in 1692, Muggles and wizards were a lot more closely intertwined than one might imagine today. What Muggles call the Spanish Armada was actually a joint venture between the Spanish monarchy and the Spanish wizarding government which was dominated at the time by Duke Esteban de Cortez y Slytherin. The deal was that the wizards would help the Muggles conquer England and install a Catholic monarch while the Muggles would help the Spanish wizards seize control of Hogwarts and force the entire Wizengamot into vassalage to the Spanish House of Slytherin. Fortunately for British wizardry, the Armada failed."

"Hang on a minute," interrupted a dubious Justin Finch-Fletchley. "Phillip II was *allied* with wizards?! The man was in charge of the Spanish Inquisition during his reign!"

Blaise shrugged. "Justin, part of the reason our History teacher is a 200-year-old ghost obsessed with goblin revolts is so that wizards and witches aren't really taught just how much actual history was *rewritten* after passage of the Statute of Secrecy. The fact that Esteban was an influential

member of the Spanish nobility wouldn't have been considered the least bit controversial before the Statute of Secrecy wrote that fact out of both the Muggle and wizarding history books. The *real* Spanish Inquisition was concerned with forcibly converting Jews and Moors to Catholicism and didn't care at all about wizards and witches so long as they were loyal to both the King and the Pope in that order."

"The *Pope* was okay with wizards and witches?!" exclaimed Justin even more dubiously.

"He still is," said Theo. "The reason you don't see many students here from predominantly Catholic countries like Spain, Italy, Brazil or Ireland – Blaise and Seamus Finnegan aside – is that most young wizards and witches from those nations usually attend magical schools run by various magical orders consisting of Catholic priests and nuns who are also wizards and witches."

Most of the Muggleborns and Halfbloods were astonished to hear for the first time about wizards and witches officially sanctioned by the Holy Church, but Neville merely nodded sagely.

"That makes sense," said Neville. "Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor House ghost, says that he was the court wizard for Henry VII before his execution. And no one had a problem with him openly practicing magic among Muggles. He was actually executed not for being a wizard but botching a spell he cast at the request of one of the other courtiers. I guess St. Mungo's Hospital predates the Anglican-Catholic split, which is why it's called that even though British wizards generally don't recognize saints."

"We're getting a bit off track," said Harry. "If we start talking about wizarding religions, we'll be here all day. Let's get back to the Armada and its effect on Slytherin's family."

"Right," said Blaise. "Anyway, the Armada failed, and in revenge against the Spanish Slytherins, the Wizengamot passed a law – the Inheritance Act of 1588 – that, among other things, magically stripped all of Slytherin's heirs of any rights over Hogwarts. It also levied an actual curse against anyone bearing the name Slytherin who set foot on the British Isles. The descendants of Slytherin who were still living in Britain at the time were forced to change their family names and disclaim any rights over Hogwarts or else emigrate."

"So there *are* heirs of Slytherin in Britain but only in the biological sense," said Hermione. "None of them are legal heirs. Do we know the names of any of these families?"

Harry spoke up. "For those families who officially renounced their Slytherin heritage, the records of the name changes were magically expunged. Everyone outside the Slytherin families themselves forgot that those families had ever been related to the Founder, and most wizards *within* those families hushed up their affiliation because being related to Slytherin was at that time considered a mark of treason. Unless a particular family kept meticulous records, there's no official way to prove today that they was descended from Salazar Slytherin."

There were, of course, *unofficial* ways. First, the magical tapestry in the Prince's Lair kept a perfect record of every wizard and witch with an unbroken line of descent from Salazar Slytherin, including the ones who changed their names. Second, any Parselmouth was presumably descended from Salazar Slytherin, though whether that



could legally support a hypothetical inheritance claim was unclear. Neither matter was something that Harry wanted to share with the study group right now no matter how much he trusted his non-Slytherin friends.

Susan Bones, who was usually somewhat quiet in the study sessions, suddenly perked up. "Hang on a minute!" She rose and darted up the stairs to the second floor of the library, returning a minute later with a heavy book bearing the title ***Hogwarts Rolls: 1925-1950***.

"The school keeps public records of student admissions, graduations, and each year's OWL and NEWT results. I found them last year," she paused, looking sad for a moment, "I wanted to look up my Mum and Dad." She coughed with slight embarrassment. "Anyway, if our mystery Gryffindor was a Third Year when he was expelled in the Spring of 1943, then he must have been Sorted in September of 1940 and would have been set to take his OWLs in June of 1945. Anyone who was on the first list but not the second must have been the student who was expelled."

"Good show, Sue!" exclaimed Justin.

Susan smiled and then flipped to the page listing the 1940 Sortings before copying that page with the Gemino Charm. Then, she did the same for the 1945 OWL results before comparing the two.

After a minute or so, her eyes widened. "Wow."

"What?" asked Harry. "Found a match?"

"Yeah," she said in obvious surprise. "The only person Sorted into Gryffindor in 1940 to not sit their OWLs was ... *Rubeus Hagrid!*"

The group sat in shocked silence before Blaise finally spoke up.

"Got to admit - *Not* my first choice for an evil mastermind."

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Nobody please flip out over Catholic wizardry. I'm not going to make a big foray into wizarding religion in the immediate future, but it seems clear to me that British wizards and witches recognize Christmas and Easter at least as much as British muggles do (that is, as generally secular holidays with Christian overtones). Nothing ever indicated that Molly was sending Harry a sweater for Yule or Saturnalia or the Winter Solstice, and I don't see much sign of pre-Christian pagan mysticism in the magic practiced at Hogwarts. Indeed, the fact that most spells use bastardized Latin strongly implies that pre-Christian pagan mysticism in Britain didn't survive the Roman legions (who probably had wizards of their own, which is why there are so many Latin names like Lucius, Severus, Minerva, Filius and Septima). Finally, we only ever see three European schools: Hogwarts (limited almost entirely to British magicals), Beauxbatons (apparently an all-girls school [UPDATE: No, apparently, it is NOT an all-girls school as twenty or so eagle-eyed readers have informed me within the last 8 hours.:)]), and Durmstrang (about which little is known except for the attitudes of Hogwarts students towards it - basically, it's where all the evil kids go - which may be the result of propaganda). Certainly, I can't imagine Irish Muggleborn wizards and witches going to a Scottish school under the authority of a London Ministry while the Troubles were at their height. My solution is a network of parochial wizarding schools run by a secret

magical wing of the Catholic Church that for ideological reasons dating back to Henry VIII just doesn't have much to do with British wizards. After all, it is repeatedly stated that every major world leader knows about magic, and like it or not, the Pope is a world leader. If I ever deal with this in-story, it won't be until Year 5 or later. Probably Year 6, actually, since in canon almost nothing happens until the last few chapters except moody teenagers being moody teenagers. The important part here is the bit about the Duke of Slytherin trying to conquer Britain in 1588, which is about 90% of why Slytherins have such a bad reputation among the British.

AN 2: The bit about Sir Nicholas is canon. He held the official title of court wizard under Henry VII (apparently a position of some importance), and he was executed for bumbling a transfiguration on an important courtier. The usual trope is that the Statute of Secrecy was invented in response to witch burnings. My subversion is that "witch burnings" were fabricated after the fact to discourage wizard-Muggle interactions and that the real reason was that wizards were tired of getting drawn into Muggle political and military affairs. After all, it's not like any actual witches died during the Salem Witch Trials. In this 'verse, more witches and wizards were probably killed for being Catholic under a Protestant regime (or vice versa) than for being found out as magical.

# Quidditch & Mayhem Again

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 26: Quidditch and Mayhem ... Again

***7 November 1992***

As the crowd roared in excitement, the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch teams met in the center of the pitch to shake hands before the start of the first game of the season. Draco spent a few minutes studying Jim Potter, his rival Seeker. The boy seemed incredibly tense and yet also rather exhausted, with obvious bags under his eyes. He *also* seemed to ignore Draco completely and instead fixed all his attention on Harry who was barely paying his brother any mind at all. After demanding (with little hope of compliance) a "good clean game," Madame Hooch blew her whistle, and the two teams took to the air. Jim flew up high above the other players before finally noticing that Draco was following him instead of Harry.

"What are you doing up here, Malfoy?" Jim said contemptuously.

"Looking for the Golden Snitch, Potter. It's what Seekers do."

Jim laughed. "So Flint decided to swap you and Harry after his fiasco last September?"

"Oh no," said Draco easily. "I've always been the Seeker, and your brother's always been a Chaser. We just thought it

would be fun to switch during that pick-up game. You know – for a laugh."

And then, Draco *smiled* at the Boy-Who-Lived.

He'd actually been put out the night before when Harry had stood him in front of a bathroom mirror for twenty minutes and made him practice a certain kind of smile, one that Harry said would communicate a message of "*I know something you don't know.*" But seeing the expression of dread that slowly spread over Jim Potter's face suddenly gave Draco a new appreciation for Harry's skill at psychological warfare. For the first time, Draco actually knew what it felt like to be on Team Harry.

Down below, the well-oiled Gryffindor scoring machine – Spinnet, Johnson and Bell – was racing towards the Slytherin goal. Near the goal post, Bell took the lead, performing her specialty fake-out maneuver to get Keeper Miles Bletchley to veer left before hurling the Quaffle through the right goal. And for a second it seemed like it would work as it usually did ... until Bletchley suddenly veered in the opposite direction and slipped into blocking position just as she let go of the ball. It was *almost* as if he was anticipating the play. Even more surprising to Bell was the way Bletchley casually knocked the Quaffle straight down into the waiting arms of Adrian Pucey who had already circled around into position to catch it and take off. Pucey flew down the field like a rocket, weaving around Peregrine Derrick who expertly batted a Bludger away and into Spinnet's path forcing her to abandon pursuit. Pucey handed the Quaffle off to Flint who threw it down the field to Harry Potter, and the Second Year immediately took off towards the Gryffindor goals. Oliver Wood readied himself to block, but to his shock, Harry *threw the Quaffle back over his shoulder without even looking* and then veered off.

Pucey was already sweeping round and up in a fast arc to catch it, and he threw the ball through the opposite goal post before Wood could reposition itself.

Up in the announcer's booth, Lee Jordan was so astonished by the Slytherins' teamwork that he couldn't think of anything insulting to say. Oliver Wood was completely gobsmacked at a perfectly executed play that would have made a professional Quidditch scout sit up and take notice, while high above the stadium, Jim Potter was just as amazed.

"... the hell?" he muttered quietly to himself.

"What? Did we score or something?" said Draco amiably. "I've been concentrating too hard on spotting the Snitch to notice the regular game play. It's quite challenging, you know. Why the Snitch might as well be *invisible*!"

Jim turned to scowl at him. "What did you say?"

"I said the Snitch is hard to spot from up here. What did you think I said?" And then, Draco *smiled* at Jim again.

Jim grunted angrily at his rival Seeker and tried to focus his attention on finding the Snitch himself. But he was increasingly distracted by the activity beneath him, and he couldn't help but watch with mounting frustration as the Slytherins methodically took apart the Gryffindor team. Bletchley seemed to read every Chaser play. Derrick and Bole seemed to break up every attempt by the Weasley Twins to set up a Bludger attack. And an increasingly frazzled Oliver Wood found himself unable to defend the goals against Slytherin Chasers who casually triple-teamed him and seemed able to fake him out at will.

Just thirty minutes into the game, the score was 90-10 in favor of Slytherin, and there was no sign of the Snitch. For an instant, Jim had thought that the game couldn't get any worse. Then, as if in response to that idea, the Slytherins in the stands stood up and began to sing in perfect unison and to the tune of "God Save the Queen."

*King of the Leprechauns*

His brains are made of bronze  
He makes us sick.

*It's really obvious that*

Jim is a total prat  
Smart as a Beater's Bat  
and just as thick.

George shook his head as Fred flew by. "Can I just say once again, Brother-of-Mine," he said just loud enough for Fred to hear, "what a *bad idea* that prank was?"

Fred grimaced. "Save the *I-told-you-so* until after our current humiliation is over please." Inside though, Fred was cringing. He'd never anticipated that their little prank against Jim from two months before would become a weapon in the hands of the Slytherins against their prized Seeker. Of course, neither of the Weasley Twins ever imagined back then that over the course of two months, brash, overconfident Jim Potter would collapse into an emotional wreck. At this point, Fred thought it would take some kind of miracle for Gryffindor to get back into the game, not realizing that miracles, of course, sometimes come in strange packages.

As Harry recovered the Quaffle and rounded towards the Gryffindor goals with Pucey following behind, he suddenly heard Bole scream "*HARRY! LOOK OUT!*" Acting on

instinct, Harry pulled up sharply and narrowly dodged one of the Bludgers. He glanced back at it and was surprised to see it arc sharply and head back towards him, ignoring three other viable targets in the process. Pouring on the speed, Harry took off towards the center Gryffindor goal. At the last second, he threw the Quaffle off to Flint and then arced up so that his feet cleared the top of the goal by less than a foot. The rogue Bludger, which was traveling in a slightly shallower arc, actually struck the top of the metal goal with a tremendous force – *BOONNNGGG!* – that startled the now somewhat shell-shocked Oliver Wood and allowed Flint to score Slytherin's tenth goal of the game.

As soon as the Quaffle went through, Flint immediately started looking for the rogue Bludger which had corrected itself almost immediately and resumed its pursuit of Harry Potter.

"*TIME OUT!*" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. Madame Hooch blew her whistle, and at Flint's direction, the rest of the team (minus Harry) quickly assembled at the center of the pitch. Flint signaled to Harry, who came in low with the rogue Bludger following close behind. As it passed through the Slytherins, the two Beaters leaped into it, but even they were surprised when the wretched thing actually drug them twenty feet across the grass before finally coming to a halt. Even then, it struggled against their combined grip, and Bletchley had to leap onto it as well in order to bring it to heel.

"WEASLEYS!" Marcus yelled towards the Gryffindor Beaters who were coming in for a landing for their own team meeting. "WAS THIS YOUR DOING?!"

"Take it easy, Flint!" George yelled back. "We didn't jinx the Bludgers! Hell, I didn't think it was *possible* to jinx a



Bludger!"

"The two biggest prank-loving arseheads in the whole school are also the Gryffindor Beaters, and it's just a coincidence that one of the Bludger's goes berserk?! You really expect me to believe that you two wankers aren't behind this?!"

An angry Fred took a step towards the Slytherin, but George put a firm arm to stop him. "If we *could* jinx a Bludger, Flint," George said, "we *might* use it against you, and we'd *probably* use it against that bigoted prat Bletchley. But we would *never* use something like that against Harry!"

"Leave it, Flint," said a breathless Harry, who'd come up behind him, followed by Draco. "I know the Twins, and this wasn't them."

"Then who the hell was it?" Flint responded.

"I don't know. Probably the same person responsible for the *last two* assassination attempts on me. Though this one seems almost lackluster compared to the doxies and the killer train." Later on, Harry would remember saying that and marvel at his lack of imagination and forethought.

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Meanwhile, up in the stands, Ron Weasley carefully made his way through the Gryffindor crowd while carrying a box holding a jumbo pumpkin juice slushie, an extra-large tub of popcorn, and a half-dozen chocolate bars of varying brands. Seamus let out an annoyed "Ouch!" as Ron slid past him and accidentally stepped on his foot.

"Where have you been?" exclaimed Dean Thomas.

"Well, the line for the bathroom was long. And then, the line for the concession stand was longer. So much so that by the time I finished buying the concessions, I needed to use the bathroom again." With that, Ron took a long drag on the straw sticking out of the slushie. "Did I miss anything exciting?"

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At that point, Madame Hooch came flying up. "Flint, you seem to have a rogue Bludger on your hands. The rules say you can continue the game or stop the match and count it as a tie under the Defective Bludger Rule. Your call."

While certainly suspicious under these circumstances, rogue Bludgers were not unheard of. The enchantments placed on Bludgers make them immune to all but the most powerful forms of dark magic, but despite that, every three or four years would see a match in which a Bludger becomes strangely fixated on a particular player and targets him or her to the exclusion of everyone else. Furthermore, whatever peculiarity caused the strange phenomenon, it could not be remedied just by replacing the defective Bludger with another one – the magic of the Bludgers is interwoven with each individual game, and a new Bludger put into play immediately adopts the exact same predatory conduct of the one it replaced. Thus, the only practical response was the Defective Bludger Rule, which allows the team containing the member targeted by the rogue Bludger the option of cancelling the game in favor of a tie or playing on despite the handicap... and the risk.

For a second, Flint looked agonized. Then, Harry grabbed his arm. "Keep playing. I can dodge a Bludger as long as you need me to."

"Harry..." Flint started to protest.

"Trust me. I've got this. I won't be able to make plays with you and Pucey, but maybe I can use the Bludger to disrupt the Gryff Chasers." Harry turned towards Draco. "How's the Git holding out?"

"He was starting to lose it, but it looks like Wood's giving him a pep talk now."

"Stay on him. Turn up the heat. And *catch that Snitch!* I *know* you can beat him, Draco!" Harry put his hand on Draco's shoulder and squeezed, and to Malfoy's surprise, he really did think that Harry believed in him, even when up against a prodigy like Jim. He nodded back with absolute seriousness.

Harry, Marcus, Adrian and Draco took to the skies. Seconds later, the other three Slytherins let the rogue Bludger go and then grabbed their own brooms. Madame Hooch blew her whistle and play resumed, this time with Harry focused solely on evading his relentless pursuer. Meanwhile, Draco flew up to match Jim's altitude close enough to talk.

"Is this how you Gryffindor's win, Potter? Cheating with a rigged Bludger? Or are you just trying to kill your brother again in an even more public manner than last time?"

"Sod off, Malfoy!" Jim snarled.

"*I hate you. I hate you. I wish you'd died!*" Draco said in a mocking nasally whine. "Half the school heard you yell that at Harry last week, Potter. You think there's a single student outside of Gryffindor House who doesn't think you're behind this?!"

"I SAID *SOD OFF!*"

Draco snickered at the other boy but then tensed slightly. The good news was that the Snitch had finally shown up. The bad news was that it was floating ten feet behind Jim Potter, and if the other Seeker noticed it, Draco wouldn't stand a chance. Schooling his face back into a mask of contempt, Draco decided that there was only one thing to do: keep Jim Potter shouting in a rage so that he didn't notice the sound of the Snitch's wings until Draco could distract him and then go after his prize.

Down below, Harry was having some success using the rogue Bludger to shake up the Gryffindor Chasers' screen patterns. Also, the whole situation had incensed Miles Bletchley. He might not have normally cared much for a Halfblood like Harry Potter, but this was *Quidditch!* In response, the angry Keeper had kicked his own defense into a furious overdrive. Between the two of them, the Gryffindors were held scoreless. Unfortunately, with only two Slytherin Chasers, Oliver Wood had gotten his own act together and was able to hold the Slytherins to only two more goals. After another fifteen minutes, the was now 120-10, so the Slytherins needed 50 more points for a Seeker-proof game.

*"Still, if nothing else weird happens,"* thought Harry, *"we may actually have this in the bag."* Belatedly, he realized that he was challenging Blaise's gods of irony.

Elsewhere on the field, Lucian Bole had just knocked the other Bludger towards Katie Bell when it abruptly stopped in mid-air, quivered for a few seconds, and then *rocketed* off in the direction of Harry Potter. "Oh you are *shitting me!*" exclaimed a furious Bole.

Harry was focused solely on speed and evasion when his attention was captured by the loud

repeated *clanging* sounds from behind him. Sparing a glance behind him, Harry was shocked to see that there were now *two* Bludgers on his tail, and the clanging sound was caused by them bumping into each other, apparently in a mutual desire to drive the other off course. Harry actually laughed. "*Unbelievable! Two rogue Bludgers! And they're fighting over which one gets to pound me into beefsteak!*"

Unable to shake one, let alone two Bludgers, Harry poured on the speed and set a course to skirt just inside the arena's retaining wall. He hoped that with a little luck one of the Bludgers would knock the other into the wall and perhaps disable it. His thoughts were on the right track. After a few seconds, the second Bludger veered off course by a few yards and then slammed back into the first so hard that it blasted *through* the retaining wall, leaving a five-foot diameter hole in it. From somewhere behind him, Harry heard the sounds of wood being smashed, presumably as the first Bludger tore through the support struts for the audience stands. He hoped they were strong enough to resist collapsing with over a thousand spectators on hand. Then, he heard a different sound: a loud metallic *SHITANG!* He spared another glance behind and was so horrified he nearly lost control of his broom. The second Bludger was now only five feet or so behind him.

And it was now covered in ten-inch-long stiletto spikes.

Harry cursed and poured on even more speed. Given his current velocity and the Bludger's normal weight, an impact with those spikes was almost certain to be fatal. "*Almost?*" he thought. "*Who am I kidding! The way my luck works, they're also poisoned!*" With that cheerful thought, Harry shot up, hoping that a higher elevation would give

him more room to maneuver and put some distance between himself the deadly projectile closing on his tail.

Up above, Draco and Jim had been virtually ignoring the events below. Jim was now shouting almost incoherently at the Slytherin, who was playing his favorite role of *Obnoxious Pureblood Prat* to the hilt, when the Snitch suddenly got bored and darted straight down. "*Finally!*" thought Draco.

*"IF YOU THINK I CARE WHAT A FILTHY DEATH EATER WANNABEE SCUMBAG LIKE YOU SAYS, YOU CAN GO STRAIGHT...!"*

"Bye now!" yelled Draco as he dove underneath Jim in a blast of speed. He actually gave the Git a jaunty wave as he flew.

Jim watched him go in confusion for a few precious seconds and then realized the Pureblood was after the Snitch. "*Sonovabitch!*" the Boy-Who-Lived said through gritted teeth as he reoriented his broom and took off after the other Seeker. By that point, Draco was near the grass and following the Snitch along the edge of the stands. Suddenly, about fifty feet straight ahead, the first Bludger that had gone underneath the stands finally blasted its way back out again, leaving a spray of wooden debris and a ten-foot-wide hole in the retaining wall. To Draco's dismay, the Snitch immediately darted into the opening and took off underneath the bleachers.

"I am going to die now," Draco said to himself with surprising calm. Then, he darted through the opening after the Snitch with Jim Potter hot on his tail.

Oblivious to Draco's apparent suicide attempt, Harry was high above the stadium dodging the spiked Bludger when

its partner in crime reappeared and shot up towards him. In desperation, Harry performed a cork-screw turn that he hadn't thought was possible on a broom but which allowed him to dodge both Bludgers and head back towards the ground. There was another *clang* behind him. He spared a look back and saw that the smooth Bludger had sheered off several of the spiked Bludger's blades before veering away out of control. He smiled for a second until he back ahead and saw, to his horror, that the majority of both teams were spread out across the field directly in front of him and he was too low to fly safely over them. Every flight path he could see would have him leading the spiked Bludger either through a cluster of Quidditch players or into the spectator stands. Every path but one. Gritting his teeth, he veered sharply to the left and flew through the first hole in the retaining wall that had been blasted open earlier by the smooth Bludger. Immediately, he was in an obstacle course, flying over, under and around the various wooden struts supporting the bleachers.

Absurdly, Harry was immediately reminded of the *Star Wars* trilogy which Hermione and Blaise had both insisted that he watch the previous Summer. Each movie had a scene like this in which the protagonists had to dive into a metal trench, a forest, an asteroid field or some other obstacle course with death hot on their heels. He laughed again, giving himself fully over his Gryffindor side, that normally constrained part of his psyche that was utterly reckless and knew no fear. "*Help me Obi-Wan! You're my only hope!*" On he flew, with the spiked Bludger smashing through all obstacles as it drew ever closer.

Underneath the bleachers on the opposite side of the arena, Draco was rapidly becoming frustrated. He was good, very good on a broom, especially for a twelve-year-old. But Jim Potter was quite plainly was on the cusp of

becoming a legend. Despite Malfoy's best efforts to navigate the maze of wooden struts and supports through which they were flying, Jim soon caught and then passed him. At that point, Draco realized, it would take a miracle to catch the Snitch.

And then, a miracle happened.

Coming from the *opposite* direction, Harry Potter blew past both Jim and Draco. He wasn't sure, but Draco could have sworn the other boy was laughing in delight. Right on Harry's tail was what Draco thought was some kind of ***BLUDGER FROM HELL*** that came smashing through the struts and support columns like they were paper. A huge blast of debris hit Jim full on. He cried out and was forced to slow for a few seconds. Draco seized the moment and darted past him. Ahead, the path was clear of obstructions, all of which had been blasted through by the spiked Bludger, yet the space was still confined enough for Draco to block Jim from passing him again.

Harry continued his evasive maneuvers until he could see light up ahead: the other hole leading back out onto the pitch. He tore through it and arced around between the Gryffindor goal posts riding close to the ground. The other players were up ahead still but he had time to maneuver. And he had a plan. "*Well, more of a desperate hope, really,*" he thought. "*Still, it worked last time. Maybe it will work even better on this one.*" He flew straight down the field, waving his hands wildly at the other players to move them out of the way. Not knowing what his plan was but not wanting to die a horrible spiky death, all the other players cleared a path. He continued waving off the Slytherin Keeper Miles Bletchley, who finally moved off to one side once he realized that Potter was aiming straight for the



central goal post. Then, at nearly the last possible second, Harry started his ascent.

"*Okay,*" he thought. "*Time to find out how good I really am on this stick.*"

The first time when Harry had led the smooth Bludger to a goalpost, he'd cleared the top by less than a foot and the smooth Bludger had bounced off the rim. But this Bludger was covered in spikes, and this time, Harry was aiming for the bottom rim where the ring met the support column. The spiked Bludger tore through wood easily, but the central column was five feet in diameter and magically-reinforced stone. Harry aimed for the very lip of the circle with the Bludger just a few feet behind. At the last possible second, Harry threw his upper body forward and extended his arms while lifting his legs back and up. And for the space of a single breath, Harry Potter wasn't riding his broom anymore. He was flying a few inches above it.

Like Superman.

Harry's broom passed over the edge of the goal with barely an inch to spare. Behind him, there was a satisfying *CLANG* as the spiked Bludger impacted with the goalpost hard enough to embed its spikes almost six inches into the marble, where it remained stuck.

"Bloody hell," whispered an awestruck Miles Bletchley as he stared in wonder at the trapped Bludger which was shaking in impotent fury as it tried unsuccessfully to pull free. Meanwhile, Harry had instantly grabbed back hold of his broom and remounted. Then, he twisted up and back over the pitch while desperately searching for the other Bludger.

"*Oh,*" he thought to himself with a mixture of surprise and sadness. "*There it is.*"

Five yards away from his head.

4

3

2

1

*Lights out!*

At almost the same time, the Snitch darted back out through the first hole, followed by Draco with Jim right behind him. Jim quickly pulled up beside Draco. Up ahead, they could both only watch helplessly as the first Bludger struck Harry in the head and knocked him off his broom from an altitude of well over 200 feet.

"YOUR BROTHER MAY HAVE JUST BEEN KILLED RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU, GIT! DO YOU EVEN CARE?!" Draco yelled furiously to Jim.

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH, DEATH EATER! YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME!"

"I KNOW ONE THING! I KNOW YOU'RE NOT GETTING THAT SNITCH!"

True Quidditch enthusiasts know that there is one Seeker maneuver above all others which is the most reckless, most dangerous and most rarely used: *The Suicide Slam*. First performed by the winning Seeker in the 1913 Quidditch World Cup, it had been used by truly desperate Seekers only eight times since. Every time it had been used, it resulted in some kind of injury to the Seeker and on one occasion a fatality. Draco, of course, was aware of the

Suicide Slam's history, but he'd always believed that it was only ever used by lunatics. Now, in this exact moment, he came to a different conclusion: that it was only used by Seekers for whom the thought of losing had suddenly become intolerable.

With a furious grunt, Draco jumped up and landed on his broom with both feet. For a few impossible seconds, a Muggleborn observer would have thought he was riding the broom like a surfboard. Then, his weight distribution caused the front of the broom to suddenly tip straight down. The instantaneous change of axis while at top speed caused the broom's flight enchantments to go completely haywire. The result was a sudden shockwave of horizontal force that propelled Malfoy forward at tremendous speed, past the astounded Jim Potter. His right hand closed around the Snitch, while he raised his left arm up to guard his face.

*"I really hope I don't die from this,"* he thought. *"Mother will never let me hear the end of it."*

Draco hit the ground with terrific force and then bounced, flipped, skidded, and rolled nearly fifty feet. The first *snap* was merely surprising. By the third, Draco was becoming slightly alarmed. Luckily, adrenaline and shock combined to make sure he didn't feel any pain ... yet. When he finally came to a rest, he thrust his right hand up in the air to show that he'd caught the Snitch. And the crowd, which had been screaming in horror at Harry's injury, now roared its approval.

Harry, of course, didn't fall to the ground. He was high enough that there was plenty of time for Dumbledore to catch him with a Levitation spell and float him down to the pitch quite near where Draco was lying still and willing himself not to cry from pain. Part of him realized that a

week earlier he'd be blubbering like a four-year-old girl and calling for his mummy, but something had just changed in him that suddenly made such public weakness unacceptable. Immediately, the Slytherin team swarmed around the two players while the ecstatic Slytherin student body poured down onto the pitch in near-delirium. Then, Professor Snape's voice boomed out across the stadium thanks to an Amplification Charm.

"MR. FLINT, SEE THAT NO ONE MOVES OR EVEN TOUCHES EITHER MR. POTTER OR MR. MALFOY UNTIL THEY HAVE RECEIVED MEDICAL REVIEW!"

Moments later, Snape and Lockhart ran up to the two injured boys to perform diagnostic spells.

"Mr. Potter has a severe concussion and a hairline fracture in his skull," said Snape. "He is otherwise unharmed, which is frankly miraculous. Mr. Flint, summon a levitating stretcher for him. His spine is undamaged so he can be moved, but *be gentle*."

Meanwhile, Lockhart was examining Draco and called out the results for Snape. "Mr. Malfoy has mostly minor cuts and bruises but two complete breaks in his left humerus, one in his left ulna. Also a dislocated kneecap. Hold still, Mr. Malfoy, and I'll have you fixed up in a jiffy."

"Ahem," said a dignified voice from behind him. "I think I should prefer for my son to be examined by a *medical professional*, if you don't mind."

Lockhart glanced back to see Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy standing over him with expressions that were at once imperious and concerned.

"Oh for pity's sake, Lucius," said Lockhart with some annoyance. "It's just basic first aid. I'll be teaching a unit on it for all seven years next January." With that, he touched his wand to Draco's arm. **"BRACKIUM EMENDO!"** A warm light flowed out of his wand to envelop Draco's injured arm. The boy gasped at the sudden sharp pain of his arm bones shifting, but he was then surprised to feel the pain disappear almost completely. After a few seconds, the light faded and Draco's arm appeared good as new. "It should be fine, Mr. Malfoy, but please do have Madame Pomfrey double-check my work. Sometimes hairline fractures remain that the basic Charm won't catch. You probably will also have some strained muscles for which she can provide pain relief." He touched Draco's knee and cast a different healing spell which seemed just as effective as the first.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Professor Lockhart," said Lucius Malfoy coolly. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced. Certainly not to the point of being on a first name basis."

Lockhart stood and bowed respectfully. "I do apologize for my impertinence, Lord Malfoy. Please forgive me. My thoughts were solely on your son, both his injuries and his remarkable performance. I'm sure you're both very proud."

Lucius looked down at Draco who had just risen to his feet, and the boy saw something in his father's eyes that he'd had never seen there before: *pride and satisfaction*. "Quite so," he said softly. "Draco, I knew you had natural skill at this game. But what I witnessed today was so much ... *more* than I was expecting and in so many ways. While I hope you do not make it a habit of risking your body so recklessly, I am indeed very proud of you."

"Thank you, Father. And thank you both for coming. I would like to spend time talking with you but..." He turned and focused all of his attention on Narcissa. "Harry Potter, my *friend*, is injured. With your kind permission, I would like to check on him. To make sure that he is *unharm*ed and *safe*."

Narcissa smiled in a manner that approximated warmth. "Of course, Dragon. Go and check on your little friend."

He bowed respectfully to both parents and then made his way through the crowd to find Harry. As he left, Narcissa stared after him intently, while Lucius stared with equal intensity at *her*. If she felt the stress of his regard, her demeanor did not show it. As for Harry Potter, he was lying on the ground waiting for the stretcher. It seemed like the whole Slytherin House was grouped around Harry, but Snape, Flint, and (somewhat surprisingly) Ginny Weasley were the ones closest. As Draco drew near, he bumped into Ginny, and for just an instant, he felt an impulse to say something ... Malfoyesque. He pushed it down. For some reason, he wasn't in the mood for their usual sniping. The girl looked up at him and bit her lip.

"That was ... the most *amazing* thing I've ever seen in a Quidditch match," she said quietly.

"Thank you," he said with a sincerity that surprised even himself.

Harry moaned softly. "Hey ... Drake ... win?"

Draco knelt down. "Yes, Harry. We won. I caught the Snitch."

"Course ya did... Drake. Never doubted." And somehow, as absurd as it sounded, Draco thought that was true.

Then, Harry's brow furrowed. "Gin? Gin Weasel?"

She knelt down while Draco stood. He had the oddest impulse to give the two of them some privacy.

"I'm here, Harry."

"Tell Snape ... bout the smell."

She looked at him in confusion. "What smell, Harry?"

"Smell that ... Iris smelled." Then, he slipped into unconsciousness. By that time, Flint had returned with an enchanted stretcher. It would stabilize Harry medically and also render him nearly weightless so that it would be easier to transport him to the Infirmary. As they carried Harry away, Ginny's eyes narrowed and then widened in surprise as she realized what Harry meant.

"Professor Snape!" she called out before running up to the man. "Can you summon a house elf down here to the Quidditch pitch?"

"That is not necessary, Miss Weasley. The stretcher is enchanted and specifically designed to transport trauma patients. That is the safest mode of transportation for Mr. Potter."

"No sir, you don't understand." She moved closer and whispered. "Back in September, Harry and I learned that *loyal* house elves can *smell* the magic of *rogue* house elves."

Snape crooked an eyebrow and nodded. "When I can do so discreetly, I will summon a house elf to examine the cursed Bludgers. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Miss Weasley."

With that, the rest of the Slytherin students headed back to the school, their joy over winning tempered by concern over their injured Chaser. Most of the Gryffindor team members headed to the showers, dejected over their loss but also troubled at how close the game came to horrific tragedy. The spectators – students and otherwise – made their way out of the arena for whatever destinations awaited them.

Jim Potter stood alone in the middle of the Quidditch pitch. He could see his mum and dad headed over to speak with him. He wondered what they'd say. He wondered what had happened. He wondered how he could have possibly lost to Draco Malfoy. He wondered how he could watch his brother fall almost lifeless out of the sky without thinking for one second about giving up on the Snitch. He wondered *what the hell was wrong with him*.

Then, he jumped with a start at the sound of a loud *SLUUURRRP!* coming from behind him. It was Ron, finishing the last of his extra large pumpkin slushie while holding out a half-empty cardboard tub with his other hand.

"Want some popcorn?"

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: RE the "Rogue Bludger Rule." In the film, Hagrid basically says "Blimey, Harry's got himself a rogue Bludger!" with all the shock and surprise of me looking out the window and noticing a large feral cat eating out of my trashcans. In other words, something unusual and frightening that nobody likes but also something which isn't that uncommon and certainly isn't the end of the world. At no point did anyone in authority even suggest pausing the game while the teachers investigated the



Bludger, so I take the position that a rogue Bludger was a phenomenon that was dangerous but not terribly unusual which Dobby was able to fake. The alternative is to assume that all of the wizards in attendance were slack-jawed dullards, and I'm trying to get away from that interpretation of the Potterverse. As for the other Bludger, well, by that point, things were happening too fast for anyone to intervene.

AN 2: I was completely flummoxed in the first movie when Harry decided to climb onto his broom and ride it like a surf board. I don't remember if he did that in the book, but just watching it, I thought it was completely bizarre. So I decided that it was absolutely as crazy as I thought it was AND ALSO a legitimate if risky Quidditch move. At least Draco didn't swallow the Snitch.

# Post-Game Developments

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 27: Post-Game Developments

### ***7 November 1992 (After the Quidditch Match) The Gryffindor Boy's Locker Room***

The first clue that something was amiss was when Fred, George and Oliver made it back to the locker room to find the door standing wide open. Inside, they found that all the non-Quidditch clothing they'd brought to change into after the game had been unceremoniously dumped into the middle of the communal showers, doused with water, and then apparently frozen into a block of ice with a Freezing Charm. As pranks went, it was pretty feeble, though plenty annoying for three guys in sweaty, smelly Quidditch gear and certainly not the sort of thing the Twins would let go without retaliation if they found out who did it.

The *real* drama started when George opened his locker and found that it was empty save for a folded piece of paper.

*Dear Weasley Terror,*

*I don't know who this book bag belonged to (whether it's the stupid one or the ugly one), but at least one of you blood traitors will have a difficult time in class without your books and notes. Such a pity you're too wretchedly poor to buy replacement copies of your text books. Mess with the snakes, and you get bit.*

*Signed,*

## *A Slimy Slytherin*

*P.S. Slytherins Rule. Gryffindors Drool.*

*P.P.S Poof*

With that, there was a flash of green flame and the paper disintegrated. George slowly sat down on a bench, completely stunned.

"It's okay, Brother-of-Mine," said Fred. "You can use my textbooks for your homework. I mean, we sit next to each other so it's not the end of the world."

George looked up at his twin, his eyes misting with emotion. "Fred, I had *the Map* folded up in my Charms book."

"... What?" Fred said. "I mean... you ... you *WHAT?! How* could you be so...?"

George's face hardened. "How could I be so *what*, Fred? You were *there* when we talked about taking Ron exploring right after the Quidditch match. I hid it in my bag so it would be handy and we wouldn't have to go back for it."

Fred sighed in frustration. "Let's look around outside, George. Maybe they just threw it up on the roof or something."

"Fred," said George dejectedly. "The Slytherins *hate us*. I'm not talking about Slytherin-Gryffindor rivalry. I mean they hate ***you and me***. I reckon the book bag *and* the Map are either at the bottom of Black Lake or else they're burning up in the Slytherin fireplace. Not to mention they got all my notes for Lockhart's research group. And the *really hilarious thing* is that they were probably just being petty by stealing my books and my notes. Whoever

took the Map probably has no idea what he has and won't even after he's destroyed it."

George put his head down into his hands and then jumped a few seconds later when Fred struck the door to his locker so hard he put a dent into it. "Oww!" he hissed in pain as he shook his hand out.

"Oi!" said Oliver Wood as he stepped back out of the shower where he'd been trying to defrost the trio's fresh clothing. "What's all this then?"

Fred said nothing. Finally, George spoke. "Whichever Slytherin messed with our clothes also took ... something that belongs to us."

"Was it valuable?" Wood asked. Both boys nodded. "Well, go and tell McGonagall about it. I'm sure she'll turn some rocks over and get it returned to you." Then, he went back to his defrosting efforts.

Fred actually laughed harshly at the thought of telling their Head of House about the Map and asking for her to get it back to them. "Oh yeah, that's going to happen. '*Here's yuir map, wee bairn. Now go back to makin' yuir mischief!*'" he said in a poor attempt at a Scottish accent. George didn't laugh.

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## ***The Infirmary***

With surprising care, Flint and Pucey shifted Harry's unconscious body from the stretcher to an infirmary bed. Once the boy was situated, Madame Pomfrey unceremoniously kicked the two older Slytherins out of the infirmary along with everyone else, though Flint got Snape to promise to provide the House with an update soon.

Outside in the corridor, several of Harry's friends and teammates (plus a few miscellaneous Slytherins interested mainly out of House pride) congregated waiting for news. After about fifteen minutes, Snape came out to address the group.

"Madame Pomfrey has completed her initial assessment. Mr. Potter is expected to recover without any lasting repercussions. His skull fracture has already been repaired, and he is currently sedated, having already taken several potions to address his concussion. He will be kept overnight for observation, but the mediwitch expects to release him tomorrow morning. He will not be seeing any visitors other than family, so all of you may now *leave the area*. That is all." With that, he turned and went back into the infirmary, closing the door rather firmly behind him. With that, the various prefects in attendance began herding students away from the infirmary.

"I don't see why everyone's so worried about Potter, anyway," muttered Cassius Warrington to his Pureblood associate Miles Bletchley. "If he can't handle a Bludger hit, maybe Quidditch is too much for him. Don't you agree, Bletchley?"

"Are you *mental*, Warrington?!" the other Pureblood exclaimed. "A rogue Bludger is probably *the* most dangerous thing that can happen in Quidditch. More often than not, *professional* Quidditch games get called off when a Bludger goes rogue. For a Second Year to insist on playing and then dodge *two* Bludgers for most of the game is amazing." He sniffed at the other Pureblood disdainfully. "And frankly, I've seen *you* fly, Warrington, and I don't think you'd have lasted thirty seconds."

Warrington's eyes flashed angrily. "Well, listen to you, Bletchley. Has being around that little blood traitor made you go soft? Whatever would your father say?"

"I imagine he'd say he was proud that he didn't raise me to be a *fool*, Warrington. Whatever our disagreements about politics, Potter's blood on his father's side is purer than mine and yours put together. And while his mother may be a Mudblood, she's got more NEWTs than either of us have a chance of seeing. Potter proved himself to me on the pitch today. If you can't see that he is a better Chaser than you *and* has bigger balls than you, that's your blindness not mine."

With that, the Keeper stormed off, leaving a fuming Cassius Warrington behind. Angry at the insult, Warrington looked around to see if anyone had seen the altercation. The only person nearby was a red-headed Gryffindor who stood about ten feet away, staring at him with an unreadable expression. "What are *you* looking at, brat?" he snarled.

Ron Weasley shrugged. "Drama?" he said before turning and walking away, softly whistling "God Save the Queen" as he went.

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### ***Hagrid's Hut***

### ***Tea Time***

Hermione and Neville approached the hut cautiously. They weren't frightened of Hagrid by any means, but they both knew that they were about to try and tap him for information about a subject that would almost certainly be painful to the gentle half-giant. And unfortunately, the two Gryffindors agreed that they weren't the best at that kind of subtle interrogation. Honestly, they needed Harry for this

sort of thing, but Snape had announced that he'd be out of action until Sunday at the earliest, and they'd already arranged to have tea with the Gamekeeper on Saturday afternoon after the Quidditch match.

Summoning his Gryffindor courage, Neville rapped sharply on the door. Hagrid jerked the door open quickly as if he were expecting trouble, but then his face lit up with a smile. "Ah, Hermione and Neville! Come in! Come in! I've jus' put the kettle on."

Hermione and Neville entered the hut and sat down for tea, which was mercifully free of rock cakes. They made small talk about the game (Hagrid felt bad for "poor Jim" but was very impressed with Harry and Draco), about their classes, about rumors of Professor Kettleburn's upcoming retirement, about the weather. Finally, Neville took a deep breath and raised the topic they both really wanted to talk about.

"Hagrid, I don't know if you've been following the school news lately, but a lot of students are really worried about what happened last Saturday night – that whole business with Mrs. Norris and that writing on the wall. There's all sorts of rumors floating around. They're saying that '*the Heir*' refers to '*the Heir of Slytherin*' and his '*enemies*' are all the Muggle-born in the school. They're also worried that there might be more petrifications in the future, maybe even of students." Neville paused and swallowed. "Some of the students have been researching, and they found out that the Chamber was supposedly opened once before ... back when you were a student. We were wondering if you could tell us about what you remember from back then." Actually, Neville already knew that Hagrid had been *expelled* around that time, possibly for some reason related to the earlier petrifications, but he wanted to let

Hagrid reveal that detail if it came up at all. Harry would have commended him for the clever Slytherinesque misdirection, but Neville was *very* Gryffindorish and all this manipulation made him feel a bit queasy.

Hagrid looked pained by the question but also resigned, as if he knew it was inevitable that such questions would be coming from somebody. "*Better Frank Longbottom's boy than some auror, I reckon,*" he thought. And with that, he began his tale.

Rubeus Hagrid was Sorted into Gryffindor in 1940. To say he was big for his age was an absurd understatement. Most of the other firsties were openly afraid of him, even among his Gryffindor classmates, and he couldn't even fit in a dormitory bed, so he ended up in a room by himself outside of Gryffindor Tower. It was lonely at first, but gradually, he made a few friends, though sadly few of them were human. Indeed, his best friend that year had eight legs: an acromantula that Hagrid found while exploring in the Forbidden Forest. Aragog was small for an acromantula, only about three feet across, and once he realized he couldn't bite through Hagrid's skin, he became quite companionable and surprisingly well-spoken for a killer spider. By the end of First Year, Hagrid had taught him to read.

Of course, Hagrid had always had a way with animals. His size and strength allowed him to easily manhandle large beasts, his skin was too tough to be clawed or bit easily, and he had a natural resistance to most forms of poison. Consequently, he was allowed to help Professor Wilbur Grubbly-Plank as a teaching aide in Care of Magical Creatures starting in his First Year. Grubbly-Plank (whose daughter Wilhelmina was two years behind Hagrid) and Deputy Headmaster Dumbledore were Hagrid's two



favorite teachers and his two biggest boosters among the Hogwarts faculty. Unfortunately, quite a few teachers didn't care for the idea of a half-giant at Hogwarts. Even more unfortunately, one of those was Armando Dippet, the Headmaster, who seemed *disgusted* by his presence in the school. Hagrid tried his best and got decent grades, but he was still isolated and alone.

In Second Year, however, Hagrid finally made some human friends. One was a slightly abrasive Ravenclaw named Myrtle Warren who spent her time alone in the Library avoiding the teasing of her cruel year-mates. Another was Eugene "Nobby" Leach, a boisterous lad whose easy laugh concealed the sadness he felt from knowing first hand how poorly even the "*we'll take the rest*" Hufflepuffs treated their Muggle-borns. But Nobby and Myrtle didn't have it near as bad as poor Tom Riddle, a Muggle-raised orphan Sorted into Slytherin who didn't know anything about either of his parents and so was presumed to be a Muggle-born as well. Two years ahead of Hagrid, Myrtle and Nobby, everybody in the school liked Tom. Or at least, everybody but his fellow Slytherins. Still, he never seemed to let it get him down, and he embraced his "*presumed Muggle-born*" status with gusto, making it his business to see that all the other Muggle-born and Muggle-raised stuck together. By the end of Hagrid's Second Year, Tom was running study groups for all the Muggle-borns in the school, and all of them were doing remarkably well, much to the chagrin of the Slytherin Purebloods. But that year was marred by tragedy as well, when Hagrid's father passed away of Dragon Pox. With no other family to look after him, Dumbledore pulled every string he could find to get Hagrid appointed to a job as junior-assistant gamekeeper just so he could stay at the castle during the Summer.

In Hagrid's Third Year, he was finally allowed to take Care of Magical Creatures as a student rather than a teacher's aide, and Professor Grubbly-Plank was delighted by his studiousness and his encyclopedic knowledge of obscure and dangerous creatures. Even though he was just a Third Year, by Christmas, the professor was suggesting that he pursue a Mastery in the subject after graduation. The only problem that year – well, during first term, at least – was that Tom no longer had time to watch over his Muggle-born proteges. He'd been made the Fifth Year Slytherin prefect (to the outrage of Purebloods like Abraxas Malfoy and his stooges) and he was in his OWLs year, so he didn't have any spare time to help with his friends studying, though he did pop in from time to time to give advice and encouragement.

It was right after Christmas Break ended that the real trouble started. Nobby Leach was the first to be petrified. His body was found just outside the Greenhouse, with the words "MUDBLOODS! BEWARE THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN!" burnt into the nearby grass. Over the next two months, three other Muggleborns were petrified, and all were found near graffiti that warned the rest of the Muggleborns to leave Hogwarts and never return. The graffiti *also* gave credit to the Heir of Slytherin, which had the dual effect of damaging the reputation of Slytherin House while rallying the Purebloods of the other three Houses around their own Muggle-born members.

Then, in March, Myrtle was found, not just petrified but *dead*. One day later, Tom Riddle confronted Hagrid in his room. The prefect had somehow discovered that Hagrid was raising a highly dangerous and highly illegal creature within the castle, and he'd assumed that whatever creature he'd been hiding in his room was the cause of the petrification. Hagrid helped Aragog get away, and then Tom turned him over to Headmaster Dippet, who was only too

happy to summarily expel him and tell him he was lucky that at the age of thirteen even an "*abomination*" like him was too young for Azkaban.

Hermione and Neville gasped. "You mean to say that Tom Riddle, who'd been your friend for two years, ratted you out to that awful Dippet?" Hermione said angrily.

"Ah, don' go blamin' poor Tom, 'Ermione. Tweren't 'is fault."

"Hagrid, how was it not his fault?" asked Neville just as outraged.

"Well, it wuz like this. Tom knew I was raising a dangerous creature – which were true – but he didn't know *what* it was. And I wouldn't tell him, because wee Aragog was still a tiny thing ... no more than three or four feet across by then, I reckon. Tho' he's much bigger now." Hagrid perked up and smiled. "I should take you two to meet 'im sometime. You'd like 'im. He's got a luvly singin' voice."

Hermione and Neville just stared at him. He coughed in embarrassment.

"Anyways, once Tom found out it were an acromantula, he was powerful sorry, as 'e knew at once I were innocent. Acromantulas can't petrify nothin'. They just bites ya and poisons ya to death. Tom kept apologizin' and tryin' to tell Ole *Dippet*," Hagrid practically spat the name out, "but it was too late. Dippet had never wanted me at Hogwarts. Lots a people didn't. And even if I weren't the *Heir o' Slytherin* – and what a load a codswallop that woulda been – I'd still been raisin' an acromantula inside the castle under me very own bed. They're Class AAAAA dark creatures, ya know, an that woulda sent me to Azkaban if I'd been older. As it twere, I jes got me wand snapped and got expelled from Hogwarts. They never did find out who the Heir was

or even if he or the Chamber of Secrets were real, The other four petrified students got de-petrified a few months later, and no one else got petrified at all. To some people that proved it were me, but *I* think it was one of them Slytherin Seventh Years and the reason it never happened 'gain was because he graduated. Personally, I'd always bet on old Abraxas Malfoy. Now *there* was a bad'un." Hagrid whistled. "Merlin, the way Tom used to rant about what a bigoted Pureblood ponce he were."

"So how did you end up back here if Headmaster Dippet was so against you?" Hermione asked.

"Why, Albus Dumbledore, a'course! Fine man, that Dumbledore. After he came back from fightin' Grindelwald, he coulda asked for the world. Turned down bein' Minister *flat*, he did! But he *did* ask that my criminal record be expunged and that I be given this job 'ere. The head gamekeeper had retired by then. I'd spent a few years at that point knockin' about Scandinavia tryin' to find me Mum, but I never did. I finally heard she'd died years before. So, I came back fer Dumbledore and have been here ever since. Ha! You should a seen Dippet's face when I moved into this hut. The old prune! Ha!"

Some time later, Hermione and Neville were walking back to the castle discussing what they'd learned.

"So, someone opened the Chamber in 1943 and set the mysterious monster against Muggle-borns," said Hermione thoughtfully. "He – or she, I suppose – petrified four Muggle-borns and then killed one, before stopping completely." She considered what Hagrid had said. "Maybe it *was* a Seventh Year who stopped with the petrifications when the girl's death threatened to get the school closed

down. Then, the Heir graduated and had no further access to the Monster."

"So what kind of Monster was it?" asked Neville. "What creatures can petrify people?"

"No idea," she answered. "I haven't started reading ahead for Care of Magical Creatures yet. In Greek mythology, a Gorgon could." She looked at her friend curiously. "Are Gorgon's real?"

"I think so, but they're very rare and I'm pretty sure you can only find them in Greece. I can't imagine how a student could have smuggled one into the school and kept it hidden for three months." Neville was thoughtful for a moment. "Next question. What was different about Myrtle that she was killed when the others were just petrified?"

"A very insightful question," said Hermione appreciatively. "Maybe we should ask her?"

"Huh?" he asked in confusion.

"Moaning Myrtle is the name of one of the Hogwarts Ghosts and one of the few who was a student here at the time of death. She was a Ravenclaw who died as a young teenager, sometime in the last century from the look of her. And she *haunts* the girls' lavatory right next to where Mrs. Norris was found."

Neville was silent for a few seconds. "I wish Harry or Blaise was here. They'd have something witty or clever to say right now about your startling revelation, but I'm just drawing a blank."

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## ***The Infirmary***

"So, Poppy, how is he really?" asked Lily Potter. She, James and Jim had joined Snape and Madame Pomfrey to check on the status of the oldest twin.

"As far as I can tell, he'll be fine," the mediwitch said. "I'm keeping him tonight for observation because he had a concussion, and sometimes they cause symptoms that aren't immediately apparent. What damage there is appears to be limited to the temporal lobe, so tomorrow, I'll give him a neuromagical exam and see if he needs follow-up treatment at St. Mungo's. If not, I'll release him first thing in the morning."

Lily and James seemed to relax at the news, while Jim's expression was unchanged.

"Can we talk to him?" Lily asked.

"Not today. I've given him a sedative, and the potions to cure the concussion will keep him semi-conscious at best and slightly delirious. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Come on, Lily," said James softly. "There's nothing more to be done here." With one last glance back at Harry, Lily allowed James to escort her and Jim out of the infirmary. Snape watched the three Potters leave through narrowed eyes, while Pomfrey cast some monitoring spells on Harry and then returned to her office. Out in the hall, the Potters passed by Draco who was walking with a slight limp. The two male Potters each looked down their noses at him as they passed with a disdain that he happily returned. Then, he stepped into the infirmary just in time to see Snape addressing a house elf.

"Kusco, please go down to the Quidditch pitch and examine the two Bludgers used in today's match. Specifically,

examine them for indications that a rogue house elf was responsible for their malfunction."

The elf actually hissed at the mention of *rogue house elves* with an anger that Draco hadn't thought possible for such creatures. And what in Merlin's name was a *rogue* house elf, anyway? Kusco popped away, and then Snape turned and noticed Draco's presence.

"Mr. Malfoy, what is your business here?"

"Professor Lockhart told me to get checked out by Madame Pomfrey in case he missed any small fractures. Sir, do you think a *house elf* was responsible for what happened with those Bludgers?"

With the practiced ease of a long-time double agent, Snape chose to bluster his way through the boy's question. "I do not make a habit of answering questions about conversations overheard by eavesdroppers, Mr. Malfoy," he sneered. "It is but one of many avenues we are investigating, albeit a highly unlikely one. Think no more of it." He turned back towards the office. "Madame Pomfrey, you have another injured student, though thankfully one who can walk under his own power."

The mediwitch came out and hustled Draco into a bed while Snape exited the infirmary with the boy's eyes following behind. Then, he relayed Lockhart's instructions, and she began casting diagnostic spells.

"Hmm. Professor Lockhart's spellwork was quite good, but he was wise to send you for a check-up. The spell he used was for aurors who need quick patches during field combat. As he said, though, it doesn't work for minor fractures or pulled muscles. Lie still for a moment and I'll be right back." She left and returned a moment later with a few foul-

smelling potions for the boy. "This one will ensure that all your bones will heal completely. This one will repair muscles and eliminate any pain. Finally, this one will put you to sleep for a few hours so you're not awake for the effects of the first potion. It shouldn't be painful, but it might be extremely ... itchy."

Draco frowned but drank the potions as instructed. As he drifted off to sleep, his last conscious thoughts were about the disturbing implications of house elves trying to murder Harry Potter. Because he thought he knew one house elf in particular who might have been ordered to try.

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### ***Snape's Classroom***

Half an hour after leaving the infirmary, Snape was back in his potions lab when Kuzco popped in to deliver his report.

"Kuzco has done as Perfesser Snapey asked. Examined both Bludgies."

"And did you detect the magic of a rogue house elf upon them?"

"No, Perfesser Snapey, sir."

Snape nodded. It had seemed like a promising avenue for investigation in light of past events, but it hadn't panned out. At least, not until Kuzco spoke again.

"Kuzco smelled the magic of *two* wicked elveses!"

*Two?*

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### ***The Infirmary***



After a few hours of sleep, Draco was awoken by a loud crack. He jerked up in his hospital bed and looked around. The infirmary was dim – from the faint light flowing through the windows, it must be right at sunset. There was no sign of Madam Pomfrey, who had probably popped down to the Great Hall for a quick dinner since there were no life-threatening injuries in the ward. Then, Draco noticed a soft blubbering voice coming from the far side of the ward. Specifically, from behind the curtains surrounding Harry Potter's bed. Draco's concern for his teammate and rival turned to surprise when he recognized the voice.

"Harry Potter came back to school! Dobby warned and warned Harry Potter! Why didn't Harry Potter go home whom when he missed train?!"

"Thought that was you..." Draco heard Harry say in a groggy, barely-conscious voice. "Ostentatious 'n ineffectual. Lucky 'm doped up or be trying wring yer scrawny neck."

"Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home."

Draco winced. When he'd been little, he'd made a sport of tormenting Dobby by threatening the poor creature with outrageous punishments until his father had found out and been furious. Lucius and Narcissa had argued thunderously about that, with Narcissa laughing at Lucius's belief that house elves were anything more than slaves and playthings. For his part, Lucius angrily replied that no matter what "*rights*" Narcissa was guaranteed by their marriage contract, his son would not be raised "*like the worst remnants of the degenerate House of Black!*" That comment actually led to a rather violent duel between the two that ended inconclusively. Since then, Draco hadn't

dared to threaten Dobby or any of the other house elves with violence. So who had been?

"Harry Potter must go home. Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough..."

"Ah, *of course* was you behind the crazy Bludger. Thas totally a thing Dobby would do." Then Harry giggled. "Were ya jes tryin' to kill me with ... smooth Bludger, or was the spiky doom one yer idea as well."

Draco carefully slid out of bed and crept towards the curtain in sock feet, grateful that Madam Pomfrey had made him take his Quidditch boots off before getting into bed.

"Not kill you sir! Never kill you! Dobby wants to save Harry Potter's life! Better sent home grievously injured than stay here, sir. Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home. And now, Harry Potter must see the danger. For the spiky doom ball was not Dobby's. That was ... *his* idea."

"*His* who? I mean, who *him*?" asked Harry groggily. "Whatever. Most of the people who want to kill me are male, I think." The male pronoun was surprising to Draco as well. He *thought* he now knew who had been behind the various attacks on Harry's life, but his suspect was female.

"Dobby cannot speak his name. Dobby was forbidden." The elf sniffled and then wailed piteously. "Oh, if Harry Potter only *knew*. If he knew what he means to us. To the lowly, the enslaved, us dregs of the magical world. Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers."

"If yer worried bout Moldy Shorts, you want m'brother Git. I mean Jim. No, Git works too. He's z'one ... who beat ... Moldy /snore/ Shorts."

"Jim Potter may be Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter. But you must understand and believe! Boy-Who-Lived might be the one to save us from bad wizardses. But ... *it is **Harry Potter** who will **decide the fate of all!***"

Draco froze at that surprising announcement. Dobby froze as well and then slapped his hands over his mouth as if he'd betrayed a terrible secret. Then, there was a soft snore from the bed, and Dobby relaxed as he realized that Harry had fallen asleep before the house elf had finished speaking. Dobby exhaled in relief and was just about to disappear when Draco yanked the curtain aside. Dobby's face assumed a look of utter terror at his young master's appearance, and he raised his hands to snap his fingers.

"*Stop*," hissed Draco as softly as he could and still give the command. "I *order you* not to leave until I am done talking to you. Do you understand?"

Fearfully, Dobby nodded his head.

"Come with me," Draco said quietly but intently. He turned and headed towards the far side of the room, away from the sleeping Harry. Dobby obediently followed. When he'd gotten as far away from Harry's bed as the room would allow, Draco turned and addressed the elf.

"Do not speak until I tell you to. Just shake your head yes or no. You learned that Harry was in danger and have been trying to protect him?" Dobby nervously and reluctantly nodded yes.

"The first Bludger that attacked Harry today. Was that you?"  
Another affirmative nod.

"And the second? The one that was actually trying to *kill* him rather than just hurt him? Was that ... Mogli?"  
Dobby quivered and nodded yes. Then, he darted over to a nearby bed, grabbed a metal chamber pot, and hit himself squarely in the face with it. Draco closed his eyes and counted to ten. He used to consider self-punishment like this to be amusing ... when he was five. Now, it was slightly nauseating, in part because he knew the role his own childishness had played in instilling such behavior into the creature.

Draco took a deep breath. "Dobby, I *order you*, without leaving anything out or evading any question – and *without punishing yourself* – to tell me everything you know about my Mother's plans for Harry Potter."

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### ***The Hogwarts' Library***

Cassius Warrington sat at a table by himself in the Library working on some rune sequences for Team Backdoor. He had a difficult assignment due in a few weeks, and he was starting to feel over his head in the class. It didn't help that he was still angry from his argument with Bletchley earlier that day. To be fair, he was annoyed in general by the mere existence of Halfblood Harry Potter, as well as by all those blood traitors in his house and especially on the Quidditch team who had embraced Potter despite his defiled heritage.

For just a second, Cassius felt a draft. Then, he was startled by a loud thump as his book bag fell off the table and onto the floor. Warrington looked around. He couldn't see how the bag might have fallen – he hadn't thought he'd left it so

near the edge of the table. The Slytherin looked around the Library but saw no one nearby, so he rose, walked around the table and picked up his bag. Underneath, there was a sealed envelope lying on the floor which the bag had landed on. After looking around once more to see if anyone was watching, he picked the envelope up and turned it over.

***TO: CASSIUS WARRINGTON***

***FROM: A FRIEND WHO'S ALSO SICK OF BLOOD  
TRAITORS***

***DON'T OPEN THIS WHERE YOU CAN BE SEEN***

Intrigued but cautious, Warrington carried the envelope deep into the stacks before breaking the seal. Inside were several pages of notes about runes and portkeys.

Warrington was surprised to realize that they were George Weasley's notes. He was even more surprised (and annoyed) to realize that the blood traitor was much farther along than he in their project. In fact, Weasley had nearly completed his part of the assignment almost two weeks ahead of schedule. For just a second, he wondered if this was a Weasley prank, but nothing bad had happened so far. The last piece of parchment was a letter written in a different hand and signed "*A Friend*." The first sentence warned him that the letter would self-destruct once read completely, so he should read everything carefully and attentively before he got to the last line.

Warrington read the note slowly and cautiously. And as the letter finally disappeared in a gout of green fire, he began to smile.

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***The Infirmary***

Draco spent about twenty minutes interrogating Dobby about what the house elf knew. It was an exasperating conversation because the house elf was addled, incoherent, and had to be repeatedly ordered not to cry. Dobby had always been ... eccentric for as long as Draco had known him, but he seemed to have gotten much worse in recent months. Slowly but surely, Draco coaxed from him the revelation that Narcissa had sent Mogli to kill Harry Potter on at least three occasions. Mogli had led the doxy swarm to the home of Potter's Muggle guardians. Mogli had replaced Peter Pettigrew's birthday gift with Erasmus Wilkes's toy train. While the train had been directed to kill as many people as possible as misdirection, its true target was always Harry, who'd only survived by a stroke of luck. Finally, Mogli had sent the more dangerous of the two Bludgers after Harry at the Quidditch match earlier that day, the one that was meant to kill rather than injure. And Draco knew why.

It was because Draco himself had suggested to his mother that he would be more popular and successful at Hogwarts if a particular classmate were *murdered*.

The epiphany shocked Draco to his core. Eight months earlier, Harry had mocked him in the Prince's Lair as being a ridiculous child-tyrant who thought it would be funny to get Theo in trouble with his father for being friends with "undesirables." Truthfully, Draco had thought that the elder Nott might have taken away Theo's spending money and toys and grounded him for the Summer. Perhaps even some minor physical punishment. Instead, according to Harry, Tiberius Nott would most likely have tortured and killed his own son. And in response to that threat to one of his friends, Harry came at Draco with a crushing and overwhelming response, one that put the possibility of

Draco's own murder at Harry's hands on the table until Harry – out of *pity* – accepted an Unbreakable Vow instead.

And then, like a spoiled child-tyrant he'd been accused of being, Draco ran crying to his mummy for help. Only now did Draco see how ridiculously, embarrassingly *petty* he'd been. How unworthy of both the House of Slytherin and the House of Malfoy. Harry Potter radiated power to any Slytherin with the perception to see it, perception that Draco evidently lacked completely. He should have been trying to build an alliance with Harry Potter from their first week at school. Instead, he repeatedly tried to bully his rival into submission with each effort blowing up in his face more disastrously than the last.

*"It's no wonder why Father never mentioned the Prince of Slytherin to me,"* Draco thought, *"let alone prepared me to seek the position for myself. I wonder how old I was when he realized I was so far under Mother's sway that I could never follow in his footsteps."*

Draco shook of those thoughts. Time was growing short. "Dobby, you kept referring to '*him*.' Do you mean Mogli?"

Dobby shivered violently. "Please be forgiving Dobby, young master. Dobby has been expressly forbidden to speak of ... *him*. Dobby would have to die before revealing *his* true name."

Draco frowned. "Okay, forget about ... *him*. What did you mean when you said Harry Potter would decide the fate of us all?"

The small creature made a face of anguish and began twisting his ears painfully. "Dobby knows but cannot explain how he knows. When Dobby first heard that Mistress sought to kill Potter child, Dobby did not know if she meant

Harry Potter or Jim Potter. But Dobby knew it was wrong to kill either child. Dobby *tried* to stay a good elf, an *obedient* elf, young master, but the wrongness of what Mistress wanted tore at Dobby's heart. Finally, Dobby *defied* Mistress by trying to protect both Potters. Dobby stole their mail so they would feel like friends didn't care and maybe they not want to return to Hoggywarts and latter blocked the portal at the train station. But when Dobby did ..."

Dobby squeezed his eyes shut in pain. When he opened them again, Draco leaned back despite himself. There was a fierce and frightening intensity in the house elf's eyes that Draco had never seen there before. And when Dobby spoke, his voice slipped into a lower register much more unsettling than the plaintive timid voice he normally used. It reminded Draco of Mogli's voice.

"When Dobby defied Mistress, Dobby heard *the Wild* calling to him. Dobby did not want to listen, but Dobby cannot *not* listen now. Through the Wild, Dobby *knew* that Harry Potter was the one who *must* be protected. Fate and Magic have marked him. Destiny stalks him. He must survive until the moment he ... *decides*."

"Decides what?" asked Draco timidly.

"... *Everything*." At that, Dobby stiffened and looked around, his eerie mood replaced by his normal frightened demeanor. "Dobby has spoken too much of the Wild. Others have heard and draw near. Dobby *must* go now, young master. *Please* give Dobby permission!"

Draco grimaced and then spoke quickly. "Dobby, if you learn anything more of Mother's plans, I order you to come to me secretly and tell me. Do the same if Mogli disappears from



the Manor for any length of time. Above all, take no further action to *protect* Harry Potter." Then, Draco bit his lip as he made what he feared might be a life-changing decision. "I will protect Harry Potter from Mother. I promise. Now go."

Dobby nodded and then disappeared with a crack. Draco barely had a second to get his thoughts together before there was another, much louder crack, and *three* house elves in Hogwarts livery were standing before him. They all looked around intently, and to Draco's surprise, they all looked as disturbingly angry as Kuzco had been earlier when Snape had talked to him about rogue elves. In fact, Draco thought they looked ready to *pounce*. Then, after a few seconds, all three turned towards him and smiled, their angry vigilance vanishing from their faces as if it had never been there.

"Begging young master's pardon, but by any chance has young master seen another house elf just now? One not of Hogwarts? Perhaps one who seemed ... odd?" From the pitch of the elf's voice, Draco assumed it was female, although there was little sign of gender.

"No," said Draco shakily. "No, I haven't."

The elf who spoke narrowed her eyes at Draco in a more calculating manner than the boy had ever seen on a house elf's face. Then, she smiled once more.

"We's is sorry to have disturbed the young master. We's be going now." And just like that, the three elves vanished with a loud crack.

Draco barely had time for his breathing to slow when he heard yet another voice.

"Hello?" called out a still-weakened Harry Potter from across the infirmary. "Is somebody there?"

Draco sighed and made his way over to the other boy's bed. "It's just me, Potter."

"Oh, hey. Sorry. Still a bit woozy. Who were you talking to?"

Draco looked around. "No one. How are you feeling?"

"Like I got hit in the head by a Bludger and then given enough potions to drug a hippo."

"Well, what's the last thing you remember?" Draco said lightly, concealing his fear that Potter remembered Dobby's rantings. The other boy already seemed to know who Dobby was, but Draco thought it best if Harry didn't know any weird house elf prophecies about himself.

"Um. I think I remember you saying you caught the Snitch. Good job... unless I just dreamed that part, in which case better luck next time." He smiled, but Draco noticed that Harry's eyes were still a bit unfocused.

"Not a dream, Potter. While you were napping, I was out winning the game for us."

"Heh. Just so long as one of us was on the case. Tell me what happened. I was kinda distracted."

Draco gave a brief summary of the Seeker's duel between himself and Jim Potter. He acknowledged that all of Harry's observations about how to get inside of his brother's head paid off. At the end, he revealed with a certain degree of embarrassment that he'd won by using the Suicide Slam maneuver.

Harry laughed and then winced in pain. "Wow. A Suicide Slam. That's a Gryffindor move, isn't it?"

Draco snorted disdainfully. "Gryffindors don't have a monopoly on boldness if that's what's needed to win. Besides, with that spectacle you were making, I doubt anyone even noticed me until I actually caught the Snitch." Draco glanced at the clock on the wall. "Anyway, I need to hurry if I'm not going to miss dinner completely. And you need rest if you're going to stop your inane babbling. You kept calling me *Drake* out on the pitch, presumably because you couldn't handle words of more than one syllable. I'll be lucky if Pucey and Bletchley don't make that my *official team nickname* now or some such rubbish."

"They should," mumbled Harry, his eyes already closing again. "It's a cool name."

"My name," the boy sniffed, "is Draco." Harry appeared to have fallen asleep again, so Draco turned and left. He'd gotten about three feet when Harry spoke once more, his words clear despite his sleepy mumble.

"Draco Malfoy's a pompous Pureblood mama's boy whose mouth outstrips his talent." Draco stiffened and whirled back towards Harry with a furious expression, but the other boy continued before he could respond.

"*Drake* Malfoy is a man of action who lets nothing stand in his way and who'll risk life and limb if that's what it takes to win. You get to choose who you become just like the rest of us."

Draco simply stood there for a few seconds, trying to come up with a meaningful response. Before he could, he noticed that Harry was snoring again. Draco sighed and left the Infirmary, his thoughts churning and conflicted.

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## ***Gryffindor Tower***

***8 November 1992 (Sunday Morning at 7:00 a.m.)***

The sun had not yet poked its head over the horizon when Jim, Ron and the other Second Year boys of Gryffindor Tower were roused from bed by the male prefects. The boys were all instructed to pull the drawers to their night stands open and to unlock and open up their trunks for inspection before heading downstairs to wait in the Common Room. The Headmaster had given the school a week to return Jim Potter's invisibility cloak, and today marked the eighth day. The younger Muggle-born students were quite shocked at the casual invasion of their privacy, and while the rest were taking it more in stride, quite a few Lions were casting evil looks towards Jim Potter on whose behalf the search was being performed. *All* of the Gryffindors were annoyed that the Great Dungeon Bat, Severus Snape himself, was overseeing the search of the male dorms. They were somewhat mollified by the fact that he was to be accompanied by Professor Flitwick and by James Lord Potter, who was personally on-hand to make sure that Snape didn't abuse this opportunity to search for contraband other than Jim's missing cloak ... or perhaps even *plant* contraband. Gryffindor paranoia ran high when Snape was involved.

The plan was to start at the top of the tower with the Seventh Year dorms and work down. The theory, which even McGonagall admitted was plausible, was that it was more likely for another Gryffindor to have taken the cloak than for an outsider to have acquired the Gryffindors' password. Likewise, an older Gryffindor might have had a non-larcenous reason for taking the cloak, such as to keep Jim Potter from using it to ruin Gryffindor's chances for the House Cup through reckless point loss as had seemed to be

his goal since his first day at Hogwarts. While Snape, Lord Potter, and Flitwick were searching the boys' rooms, the Gryffindor girls' dorms would be searched by McGonagall, Lily Potter, and Professor Vector. If the cloak wasn't found here, they would move on to the other dorms.

While the search was taking place, nearly all of the Lions were waiting irritably in the Common Room, many of them falling back to sleep in overstuffed chairs or on couches. The Weasley Twins had actually each brought a pillow and blanket down with them and were lying comfortably on the floor in front of the fireplace, near where Ron was quietly working on a Charms essay. Percy sidled up to them with his usual disapproving look.

"Just to reassure myself – you two aren't dense enough to have left any of your usual nonsense lying around for Professor Snape to find, are you?"

"Nah, Perfect Prefect Percy," said Fred sleepily. "Nothing illegal in the dorms. We have a *secret* stash for all the stuff that might get us expelled." Percy gave a long-suffering sigh.

"Hang on a minute!" interjected Lee Jordan. "They're just looking for Potter's cloak, aren't they? I figured they'd just walk into a room, say '*Accio Potter's Cloak*' and be done with it."

"The Potter Cloak," said Percy, "among its other illicit benefits, is apparently immune to the standard Summoning Charm. Which means the professors will have to physically search each room." Then, he noticed Lee's suddenly nervous expression. "Why? What sort of contraband do *you* have if the Twins are, to my amazement, clean for once?"

"... nothing," Lee said in a guilty voice.

George chuckled. "Relax, Lee. They're on the hunt for a priceless magical artifact that, for some reason, they let a Second Year run around with. Snape doesn't care about those skin mags you keep hidden under your mattress."

"Guys, shut up!" hissed Lee, while Percy clucked his tongue disdainfully.

A few feet away, Jim, who had been eavesdropping, stiffened slightly in his chair as Percy explained how the searches were to be performed. He knew the school-wide search was set for today, but he hadn't realized it would be so ... thorough. Across the room, Luna's posture stiffened as well, and then she reached over and tugged on the sleeve of Hermione's robe.

"The big fat wrackspurt in Jim's tummy has started quivering and rubbing its hind legs together," she whispered. "And his nargles just turned purple and got all flittery."

"Right," said Hermione softly. "We've talked about this, dear. Skip past the physical descriptions and just tell me your conclusions."

Luna nodded. "I think he just overheard something that made him very nervous and quite a bit frightened. And it has something to do with whatever's been making him act so ... not-Jim for the past few months."

Before Hermione could ask anything more, the assembled Gryffindors were distracted by loud shouting from up the stairs leading to the boys' dorms.

"Ah, here we go," said George amiably. "Lord Potter and Professor Snape have finally started arguing and are probably about to hex one another. I wish we'd had time to set up a betting pool."

All the jokes ceased, however, when Snape stormed down the stairs in a fury and headed towards Jim Potter, with the boy's father close behind. Somewhat surprisingly, the younger Potter wasn't even looking at Snape's angry face. Instead, all of his attention was focused on the small red book in Shape's hand, a detail noticed only by Luna Lovegood who suddenly grasped Hermione's arm very tightly.

"Where did you get this book, Potter?!" Snape practically growled.

"That's ... I ... that's none of your concern! It's got nothing to do with my cloak!" he blustered.

Around the room, several of the Gryffindors were stunned at how disrespectful Jim was. Despite himself, the boy looked defiantly up into the Potions Master's eyes. Suddenly, Jim flashed back to a memory of studying from the book just the previous night. Surprised and pleased to realize that he could now sense Snape's Legilimency intrusion, Jim reflexively focused on his hatred for the man and imagined that memory *on fire*. Instantly, Snape broke contact and stepped back in shock. However, Jim's satisfaction at repelling the intruder was quickly overtaken by the realization that he'd effectively just confessed to having studied from the forbidden book.

By that point, Lily Potter had come down the stairs from the girls dorms. "What's going on? What's with all the shouting?"

James ignored her to focus on Snape. "Did ... did you just *legilimize my son*?!" he asked with disbelief and outrage.

Snape turned back to face the Potters. "We will continue this discussion in the Headmaster's Office. Now." With that, he turned and strode towards the Common Room door. But James Potter wasn't finished yet.

"The *hell* we will, *Snivellus*! You just used Leglimency on the son of an Ancient and Noble House! I'll have your job for this!"

A few students gasped at James's use of that name, and McGonagall's wand hand twitched due to her anger. Across the room, Hermione simply furrowed her brow as certain connections came together in her head. Otherwise, the room became deathly silent as Snape suddenly halted, froze for a few seconds, and then slowly turned back to face his old rival. When he did, James suddenly became uneasy. He'd expected Snape's face to show either sneering contempt or spitting anger. But instead, Snape actually *smiled* at him, and his eyes practically danced as if he felt ... *victorious*?

"Very well, Lord Potter. I had hoped to spare your *illustrious House* further public embarrassment, but *if you insist*." He threw the book to the former Quidditch star who caught it easily. "***Occlumency: A Beginner's Guide***, whose author identifies himself only as *Mr. Nemo*."

James, who had started flipping through the small book, looked up suddenly and then over at his abashed son.

"Jim!" exclaimed Lily. "You know we said you weren't ready for Occlumency training!"



"Son," said James, "going behind our back is no way to prove that you're mature enough for something like this. I'm very disappointed in you."

Snape barked out a laugh, startling everyone in the room, most of whom thought the man incapable of such expression. "As usual, Potter, you make everything about your own puerile feelings and *miss what's important!* 'Nemo' is the Latin word for '*nobody!*' An appropriate pseudonym, don't you agree, for the man *you* probably know better as *Augustus Rookwood!*"

James's face went ashen, while several of the older students suddenly looked over at Jim in shock.

"Yes," Snape continued relentlessly. "*That* Augustus Rookwood! The former *Unspeakable* who now rots in Azkaban having betrayed his most sacred oaths in exchange for a place as *one of the Dark Lord's most trusted lieutenants!*" Snape actually laughed again at the look on James's horrified expression which matched that of his son. "Your precious offspring, the world-renowned *Boy-Who-Lived*, has been teaching himself Occlumency *out of a Death Eater training manual!*"

James was speechless for several seconds before he was finally able to address his son. "Jim... is ... is this ... true?!"

Jim Potter blinked several times and licked his lips. "I want to talk to my lawyer."

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: This is not the start of Drarry. This is not even the start of Draco and Harry being friends. This is, perhaps, the start of Draco and Harry being ... frenemies.

AN 2: Before people flip out about "oh God, another prophecy about Harry," what Dobby said wasn't a new prophecy. Rather, it reflects Dobby's skewed comprehension of Harry's possible role in the Cassandra Trelawney prophecy from the 18th century, the one that hasn't been revealed in its entirety yet. It's something Dobby is only peripherally aware of and can't fully understand because, well, he's not quite wild enough, and hopefully never will be because you don't come back from that. The important bit here is that Draco knows something weirdly prophetic about Harry and is trying to figure out how to leverage it without running afoul of house elves (about which he is now likely quite paranoid - and with good reason:)).

# Meet Peter Pettigrew

## CHAPTER 28: Meet Peter Pettigrew

***8 November 1992***

***9:00 a.m.***

Harry sat patiently while Poppy Pomfrey waved her wand over his head to perform a final diagnosis before his discharge.

"Well, Mr. Potter. Everything seems to be perfectly alright. That said, the brain is a tricky thing. I am 99.99% certain you are completely well, *but* it is still possible that you have suffered some sort of brain injury too subtle to show up in my diagnostic scans. If there is any damage at all, it will be to your temporal lobe, in that portion of your brain that handles speech and communication. Damage to that area sometimes results in communicative disorders, so if you find at any point that you are unable to understand something that someone else says, if you notice you are unable to remember words that you understood before yesterday, if you unintentionally substitute words in a random manner, or if you notice any other problems with communication, come see me immediately and we'll get you sent off to St. Mungo's for a more thorough examination and treatment regimen. However, that looks to be very, very unlikely based on what I've seen, so I see no reason not to release you at this time."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Harry said. "Um, do I have any school clothes here?" His Quidditch uniform was gone, replaced by plain pajamas.

"Ah, yes. Your friends Mr. Zabini and Mr. Nott brought some of your school clothes last night. They're on the chair next to your bed. Oh, I almost forgot. Your glasses didn't survive the Bludger, I'm afraid. Too damaged even for a Reparo spell. So, I took the liberty of contacting Healer Tonks in Hogsmeade, and he sent you a new pair. They're on the night stand."

Harry turned and picked up the glasses. They were of the same style he'd been wearing since his first day in Diagon Alley – circular lenses with wire frames, just like his father and brother wore. James had bought him a new pair to replace the awful ones Petunia Dursley had gotten for him out of a bin for donated glasses. Harry suddenly considered how acquiring glasses like these represented a part of his initiation into the House of Potter. *"I wonder if Ted could send me a catalog so I can look for some different frames. It's high time I stop following their lead."*

The boy had just finished getting dressed when he heard a familiar voice call his name. It was Hermione, and as he peered around the curtain, he was pleased to see Neville with her.

"Hermione! Neville! What brings my two favorite Gryffindors here? I was just about to leave for breakfast. I haven't eaten solid food since yesterday morning." Then, he noticed their serious expressions. "Uh-oh. I know that look. What's happened?"

"We thought we'd best come in and walk you to breakfast," said Neville. "And on the way, we'd fill you in on the insanity that hit Gryffindor Tower this morning."

"Oh, good grief. What now?" asked Harry.

"You may have forgotten," Hermione said, "but no one has turned in Jim's missing invisibility cloak, so today was the day the castle was to be searched." He hadn't forgotten – the only questionable materials he owned were two slightly controversial Occlumency books and a pensieve of mysterious provenance, all of which he'd sealed away in the Lair. "And for reasons which defy all *sanity and sense*, the Gryffindor male dorms were searched by Professor Snape and your father."

Harry stared at Hermione as if she'd just said the moon was on fire. "Whose stupid idea was that?" he exclaimed.

Neville responded. "Apparently, Snape insisted on being the one to search Gryffindor Tower because he's convinced that Jim still has the cloak but hid it in order to get you into trouble. When your father heard that, he pitched a fit and insisted on following Snape around to make sure he didn't plant contraband among Jim's things. He needn't have bothered. Jim was apparently capable of leaving his own contraband around to find."

"What was it? More dungbombs?" Harry said with a chuckle.

"I'm afraid it was a bit more serious than that, Harry," said Hermione. "Somehow, Jim got hold of a book that he was using to teach himself Occlumency. Unfortunately for him, Professor Snape recognized it. It was the book that was used to teach Occlumency *to You-Know-Who's Death Eaters!* "

Harry stared at his friends in astonishment for several seconds while he waited on the punchline to their joke before finally realizing that there wasn't one.

"Did ... did I get *all* the common sense when Jim and I were born?! Where did he even *find* this book?"

"We don't know," she continued. "Once Jim was informed of the book's true nature, he shut up and said he wouldn't say anything until he talked to someone named Peter Pettigrew. His lawyer, apparently."

"The Potter Family solicitor, actually," replied Harry. "He's also Jim's godfather. I've never liked him. He seems ... sketchy."

"Gram said the same thing after your birthday party," said Neville. "Well, she didn't actually say '*sketchy*.' As I recall, she said she didn't think he was '*bona fide*' and that something about him made her want to keep her wand at the ready. Anyway, when Jim said that he'd only talk to this Pettigrew bloke, your parents both hit the roof. We just wanted you to know what happened before you got some garbled account from the rumor mill later. I'm sure the Hufflepuffs will be certain Jim's a budding Dark Lord by supptime."

Harry laughed at that, but Hermione chided him.

"This is serious, Harry. From what little we overheard from Professor Snape - who, I must say, seemed *delighted* to reveal all of this in front of the *entire Gryffindor House!* - it's likely that this book is responsible for a lot of Jim's behavior. It teaches you Occlumency, and rather quickly, it seems, but in the process, it reorders your thinking processes to make you more violent and less able to feel positive emotions like compassion or empathy. It's a big part of why You-Know-Who seemed to have an endless supply of deranged cannon fodder troops who would massacre a

whole family of Muggles just for sport! Thank goodness Jim was found out before he went completely mental!"

Harry nodded. Privately, he suspected that the mysterious book's impact on Jim probably wasn't as great as Hermione had feared. Most likely, it had just taught him new and innovative ways to be a Git.

"Alright. That's enough about Jim. I'm sure the teachers here will get to the bottom of it and Dumbledore will get him whatever help he needs. In the meantime, I'm *starving*. So let's go grab some breakfast. Then, we'll catch up to Theo and Blaise, and you can fill me in on how things went with Hagrid."

The two Gryffindors nodded. After all, they did have a lot to discuss beyond Jim's current woes.

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### ***Meanwhile in the Headmaster's Office***

The Headmaster's fireplace erupted into a brilliant green bonfire before an oddly dressed Peter Pettigrew stepped through into the office. Straightening up, the solicitor brushed Floo ash off his tweed jacket and the rather loud argyle sweater vest worn beneath it. His trousers (in a different tweed pattern) were buckled just below the knee to reveal knee-high argyle socks that matched his sweater vest. His shoes made a clattering sound on the stone floor due to metallic cleats on the soles, and a riding cap in a third tweed pattern rested on his head.

"I do apologize for my attire, Headmaster," Peter said, "but I was just about to apparate up to Edinburgh for my weekly back nine at Muirfield when I got James's message."

The other witches and wizards present stared at the man in total confusion before Lily finally spoke up. "Golf. It's a Muggle sport. The course at Muirfield is rather prestigious, as I recall."

"Ah, of course. Golf!" exclaimed Dumbledore almost merrily. "Alastor Moody once mentioned it to me as the only leisure activity he actually found relaxing." There was an audible grumble from Snape in the background.

"You should try it, Albus," said Pettigrew amiably. "It's the easiest game in the world to play. You just hit a tiny ball with a long thin cudgel, and then you shout profanity as loudly as you can whenever it doesn't go exactly where you intended. '*A good walk spoiled*' as the Muggle Gladstone once described it. But enough chit-chat. James rather excitedly said that you all needed me to give Jim some sort of talking to. So, I'd appreciate it if someone were to tell me what's going on with my godson."

And so James did with much swearing. Peter interrupted him with only a few questions, and his face never deviated from a state of placid calm. Snape studied the man carefully and cautiously but said nothing. Inwardly, he was intrigued. He'd barely interacted with Pettigrew at all in the fifteen years or so since graduation. The fact that the least prominent and capable of the Marauders had obtained a Law Mastery was surprising but not outrageous. The fact that Pettigrew had also become an Occlumens and a rather good one was, Snape thought, far more astonishing.

"Right, first things first," Pettigrew said. "Albus, might I trouble you for a quill, some ink and a piece of parchment." The Headmaster provided the requested items, and Peter quickly began drafting a short legal document, idly humming a tune as he went. Lily was pretty sure it was an



old Rolling Stones tune, but she didn't remember which one. Unlike James, Peter had apparently *not* forgotten that summer in 1976 when Sirius convinced the other Marauders to "*go Muggle*" for a month. After a minute or so, Peter set the quill aside and blew on the document to dry it before handing it to James.

"This is a release for you and Lily to sign acknowledging that in this specific matter I am acting as Jim's legal representative exclusively, that my primary duty while representing Jim is to protect his interests, and that anything he says to me will be privileged and not something I can reveal to anyone else save by Jim's consent. Not even to you and Lily."

James suddenly looked angry, but Peter merely smiled. "You may recall, James, that I am also Jim's godfather, a role I take *very seriously*."

"I know that, Peter," Lord Potter said through gritted teeth, "but as your friend *and* your employer, I think I'm entitled to know what my son's been up to *especially* when he's accused of possible crimes relating to *You-Know-Who!*"

"I understand your position perfectly well, James," said Peter sagely. "If you are unhappy with signing this release, I will be more than happy to proceed without it. Just let me pop back to the office for a few hours so I can draft papers withdrawing as your solicitor, your Steward, and your Wizengamot Proxy, and then I can come back here and represent Jim on a pro bono basis."

"Dammit, Peter!"

"*As I said*, James," Pettigrew interrupted firmly, "I take my role as godfather *very seriously*."

James's face twisted into an angry mask for a few seconds before he surrendered. "*Fine*, Peter. Just give me the damned parchment to sign and then go talk some sense into my son."

Peter smiled happily as both Potters signed the release. Then, he turned to Dumbledore. "And now that that's settled, Albus, I should be very grateful if you could provide a room in which to meet with my client. Specifically, a room without any portraits in it. A broom cupboard or disused lavatory will suffice if there aren't any other rooms that meet that requirement."

McGonagall stiffened angrily at Pettigrew's insinuation, but Dumbledore merely chuckled. "As I recall, Peter, we *do* have a few private meeting rooms near the entrance to the dungeon set aside for just such privacy. The Slytherin alumni have been rather insistent about there being no portraits in those rooms since, well, since approximately the War of the Roses, I should think."

Pettigrew laughed cheerfully. "Why am I not surprised? Here's to our Slytherin friends and their endless but occasionally useful paranoia." He actually had the temerity to wink at Snape when he said that, which only made the Potions Master growl even louder.

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### ***The "Meeting Room"***

***9:30 a.m.***

Jim was already waiting nervously in the room Dumbledore had set aside for his meeting with Pettigrew when the solicitor finally arrived.

"Na-ah!" Pettigrew exclaimed, holding up a hand to silence his godson before Jim could say a word. Then, he spent

nearly a minute casting privacy and detection charms before putting his wand away and holding out his arms for the impatient boy. Jim practically ran into his godfather's embrace and immediately began sobbing.

"I'm ... s-so sorry, Uncle Pete. S'all my fault!" Then, the distraught boy began to weep into Peter's chest.

"Shh, stop that, Sport. You stop that this instant. It was *my* fool mistake, giving you that book without working harder to ensure its safety. You're not to blame when the people meant to protect you let you down." Peter stepped back. "Now, let me take a good look at you. How are you feeling? Has that blasted book harmed you at all?"

Jim took a deep breath and wiped his nose with his sleeve. "I don't think so. At least, not much. I've..." He looked away for a second in shame. "I've been taking lots of potions for headaches and upset stomachs, so there's that." Then, he looked back up at Pettigrew timidly. "And a lot of Calming Draughts. The book said that I should suppress my anger until I was ready to let it out. But that just made me feel angry all the time. Maybe I read it wrong."

"Hmph. Or maybe that's what the book was *supposed* to do." Peter said tiredly. "Keep you angry so that you couldn't think straight and then ... corrupt you." He blinked his eyes repeatedly and then made a show of wiping them with a handkerchief. "And I tell you once again," he said, choking back a sob, "how sorry I am that I ever laid eyes on it. Whatever it takes, I'll make it up to you." The two hugged once more before Peter got hold of his emotions. "But right now, we need to put that aside. Forget what's in the past, Sport. We need to start looking forward now and find you a way out of this mess."

Jim was silent for a few seconds. "What's going to happen to me, Uncle Pete?" he said quietly. "Will ... will I be ... expelled?"

Peter sighed. "I won't lie to you, Sport. Snape's pushing for it. He say's you're '*a danger to yourself and others.*'" Jim made a face at the mention of Snape's name. "Of course, his personal biases are grounds for ignoring his input, but a bigger problem is McGonagall. She's been unhappy with you for a while. I think she regrets letting your Dad and the rest of us Marauders get away with too much back in our school days, and she's overcompensating now." Peter hesitated. "I *think* I've got Dumbledore talked out of expulsion or suspension, but I'm pretty sure it will be conditional on you getting regular counseling of some sort."

"Honestly, I don't have any problems with seeing a counselor or a mind healer or something like that. I *want* to. I've ... I've been kinda worried for the last week or so. Ever since ... that thing with Harry." Jim ran his fingers through his messy Potter hair as he thought back to his assault on his twin brother. "I know it was wrong. Not just wrong. It was ... horrible. But at the time, it just felt so..." He paused and looked away, unwilling to face his godfather.

"It felt so ... what?" Peter said kindly.

"Good. It felt ... good to let out all that anger." Jim turned back around, his face a mask of anguish. "But ... when it was over and I ... came back down ... I felt just sick. And then, I got so scared because ..." There was a sudden shudder in his voice. "Because I think if somebody hadn't pulled me off of Harry in time, I might have killed him." He shook his head. "Maybe I should just let them expel me. Maybe I am a danger to others."

"That is *nonsense*! Now you listen to me, Jim Potter! I have known you your entire life, and I will never accept the idea of you being a danger to yourself or anyone else. Well, at least not anyone who doesn't deserve it like You-Know-Who! You are idolized by the wizarding world for *a reason*. Now that doesn't mean that you won't face adversity or make mistakes. We all do. But I *know* you can overcome them. Just as I *know* you are meant for *greatness*." Pettigrew clapped his hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezed as Jim relaxed and smiled at the praise, even though his eyes were still wet.

"Thanks, Uncle Pete," he said.

"Good. So, now that you're out of your *funk*," Peter said with a smile, "we need to start brainstorming for what to do next. As your godfather and solicitor, my immediate recommendation is total honesty. Let's just go back to Dumbledore, tell him that I foolishly gave you the book as a birthday present, and you've only been using it since then. I'll take full responsibility for your possession of it, and after that, I'm sure he'll be amenable to letting you off with a warning and some counseling."

"*What!?*" Jim exclaimed. "No, no, wait just *a second!* What happens to *you* if we do that?"

"That's not important, Jim."

"IT IS TO ME!" the boy shouted suddenly, his eyes flashing. "You're ... you're the only grown-up who's *really* been there for me the way I needed them to. Hell, aside from *Ron*, you're the only person in the world I trust completely. So tell me what's going to happen to *you* if we tell anyone that you gave me the book!"

Pettigrew sighed and looked down at the floor before speaking. "Best case scenario: Your parents are completely furious with me and cut me off from you, at least for a while. *Worst* case scenario: They have me prosecuted for giving a dark artifact to a minor. Disbarment plus three to five in Azkaban." Jim's face went white. "But I'm sure it won't come to that. James will forgive me ... in time."

"We can't take that chance. No, I'm not telling Dumbledore *anything* if there's a chance that I could lose you, and certainly not if you might get sent to Azkaban just for trying to help me!"

"Jim, I'm a Gryffindor like you. We do what's right, not what's easy, remember?"

"Yeah, but sometimes, what's *right* isn't obvious! *I* was the one who begged *you* for Occlumency training. And it was the *right thing to do!* It still is, even if we weren't smart in how we went about it. You shouldn't get punished because of that!"

"Jim, why is it so important that you learn Occlumency? And so especially important that you conceal it from Lily and James?"

Jim hesitated. "How good is *your* Occlumency? If I tell you a secret can you keep it no matter what?"

"I'm bound by Solicitor's Oath now, Sport, and I even got your mum and dad to sign a waiver acknowledging you as my primary client. Whatever we say in this room, there's no power in the wizarding world that can force it out of me without your consent." Which was not *completely* true, but close enough to not be a lie. "Now, what's so important that you need such secrecy?"

Jim sat down in a chair and stared into the nearby fireplace, as if drawing strength from the flames to unburden himself. "What do you know about prophecies? Specifically, prophecies about *me*?"

"What do you mean?" Peter said very softly.

Jim continued to stare into the fire. There was a tremor in his voice when he spoke. "Voldemort's not dead. And before long, he'll be coming after me."

Pettigrew was silent for a moment. Then, he moved over and took a seat opposite his godson. "Jim, Sport ... tell me everything," he said in his most serious voice.

And the boy did. He talked about his encounter with Voldemort the previous May, when the Dark Lord freely admitted that Severus Snape had brought him the first few lines of the Prophecy. And then, about how he overheard his parents arguing about the rest of the Prophecy which they knew but had concealed from him. That he didn't know the exact words, but that he supposedly had some "power the Dark Lord knew not" and that the two of them were destined to have a final confrontation from which only one would survive.

Pettigrew was silent until a nervous Jim finally looked up into his and was shocked to see that his godfather was almost crying. And yet, he wore a smile on his face, one showing pride in his young godson.

"Oh, Jim. My poor, brave soldier. To think you've had to shoulder this burden by yourself all these months. No wonder you've struggled with all these issues, feeling alone as you must have. And you were *right*. You *must* have Occlumency training! I understand that now. I understand,

Jim, and I *promise* that I will never leave your side. Not until your conflict with You-Know-Who is *ended*."

Jim smiled back at his godfather and ducked his head bashfully at Pettigrew's words. After the last few weeks, it felt good to be reminded that there was someone reliable in his corner. "So what do we do? Can we get away with just, I dunno, *lying* about where I found the book?"

"Not easily, Sport. Even if Dumbledore doesn't insist on viewing your memories of where the book came from, there's every chance that Snape might try to legitimize you illegally. To be certain of concealing my involvement, we'd need to ..." Pettigrew stopped in mid-sentence and then closed his mouth.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's too risky. Forget I said anything."

"Uncle Pete!" said Jim urgently. "We're way past *risky*. Now *tell me*."

Pettigrew sighed and rubbed the back of his head. "Jim, how familiar are you with ... Memory Charms?"

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***The Hogwarts Library***  
***10:30 a.m***

"Twelve OWLs. *Eight* NEWTs, all Outstanding. Head Boy. An award for '*Special Services to the School*.' This Tom Riddle character seems to have had it all." Harry had been reading from the Hogwarts Rolls for 1945 while Hermione, Neville, Blaise and Theo sat around their usual table.



*"Not to mention," he thought to himself, "Prince of Slytherin during his last two years despite the handicap of falling somewhere between Muggle-born and Half-Blood and growing up without parents in a Depression-era Muggle orphanage."*

"So why have we never heard of him before now," asked Neville. "With grades like that, you'd expect him to be a Minister of Magic or something."

"Oh hardly," said Blaise with a wave of his hand. "The Ministers of Magic have pretty much been a string of mediocrities for the last century at least. The Wizengamot has generally managed to keep all the actually clever and competent people out of that position rather than risk the Ancient and Noble Houses losing power. Ironically, the most competent one might well have been Hagrid's friend Nobby Leach, the first and so far only Muggle-born Minister for Magic ... well, until his tragic and not-at-all-mysterious death from an '*undisclosed illness*.' All that aside, I agree that someone with this kind of academic record should have made a splash somewhere, but I couldn't find *anything* out about Tom Riddle after his graduation."

Harry nodded and privately resolved to ask the Hydra later that evening. "Let's set that aside for now. What have we learned from the ghost of Myrtle Warren?"

"Surprisingly little," said Hermione. "Susan, Padma and I went to see her last night after supper. All we could get out of her was that on the night she died she'd been hiding in the girls' lavatory because someone named Olive Hornsby had been teasing her. She remembered hearing a boy's voice and a grinding sound, followed by some kind of hissing noise. Then, she came out of the stall... and died."

Also something about '*big yellow eyes*. 'On the whole, it was not a helpful interview."

Harry thought for a moment and scratched his head. Then, annoyed with himself, he carefully patted his hair back into place. "What about the other petrification victims? They were all eventually de-petrified. What did they remember about how they got that way?" Everyone looked thoughtful, as it was not a question any of them had considered.

"Can we get into touch with them?" asked Neville. "I know Nobby Leach died back in the 50's. What about the rest?"

Unfortunately, a review of the names Hagrid provided for the other petrified Muggle-born students revealed that all of them had died under tragic circumstances prior to 1960, a fact that Harry found *highly* suspicious. But before he could comment on the fact, Harry noticed an unexpected visitor to the Library: James Potter, who was looking over at him expectantly. Excusing himself from his friends, Harry walked over to where his father waited by the door.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked amiably.

James sighed. "Harry, I know I'm not supposed to be around you unless Snape is here, but ... well, I wanted to know how you were and ... frankly, now is not a good time for Snape and I to be in the same room together. Can we just ... talk for two minutes without getting lawyers involved?

"I suppose so," said Harry guardedly. "Depending on the topics, of course."

"So ... how are you? No lingering effects from that Bludger? I took a few in my day. I remember what they feel like."

Harry stared for just a few minutes as if searching for some hidden meaning behind the question. "I'm fine. No lasting effects. Madame Pomfrey does good work."

"That she does. That she does. And I want you to know that we're still investigating who was responsible for this attack and the earlier ones. We'll get whoever is responsible."

"Glad to hear it," Harry replied tersely.

James swallowed. "Your flying was incredible. Reminds me of ... me from back during my school days."

"Well, I'm sure that's where I get it from," Harry said as he tried and failed to keep any frostiness out of his voice. *"I mean it has to be genetic because you certainly never taught me to fly a broom,"* he thought briefly before clamping down with his Occlumency. There was nothing to be gained from being openly bitter to the man's face. At least, not at the moment.

"I'm ... sorry Lily and I didn't get to see you while you were in the Infirmary," the boy's father continued. "Madame Pomfrey had already put you under before we could make it up there."

"That's alright. I quite understand," said Harry who knew that the Potters had nearly forty minutes to reach the Infirmary before the mediwitch gave him the Sleeping Potion that put him under. "Any luck finding the cloak? I, uh, heard about what happened with Jim. Bad business, that."

"Yes," James said after an embarrassed cough. "Very bad. Anyway, the other professors completed a search while your mother and I went to the Headmaster's Office to talk about ... all that. Apparently, there's no sign of the cloak anywhere in the castle."

"I wasn't there when the Slytherin dungeons were searched. I hope nothing ... inappropriate was found."

"No, no," James answered quickly as if to reassure Harry. "As far as I've been told, you and your House were perfectly clean."

"That's good to know," Harry replied blandly, while trying to figure out how to get out of this deeply uncomfortable situation. It was bizarre to Harry that he found his conversation with *Voldemort* from the previous May to be less awkward than the current one with his own father. Mercifully, the Head Girl entered the Library just then to inform James that he was wanted back in the Headmaster's Office. He turned back to Harry.

"Well, I need to head off. Apparently, Peter's finally gotten some answers about what Jim's been up to."

"I quite understand," Harry said once again. "Priorities and all that."

James paused, unsure of whether Harry was being sarcastic or not. Then, he nodded his head and left the Library. Harry returned to his friends.

"You alright?" asked Neville.

"Of course," Harry replied calmly. "Why wouldn't I be? Now, back to business. Were there any teachers here in 1943 who are still on staff today?"

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***The Headmaster's Office***  
***11:15 a.m.***

"Borgin & Burkes?! That's where he got the book?!" James exclaimed angrily. After almost two hours spent with Jim in the meeting room, Peter had returned to the Headmaster's office to inform the Potters and Dumbledore of what he'd learned.

"Yes," Peter said easily. "As you know, James, there was a Floo mishap on the day that Jim went to Diagon Alley to pick up his school supplies, and by happenstance, he was kicked out of the fireplace at Borgin & Burkes. Almost immediately, Lucius Malfoy and his precocious little tyke showed up, and Jim was forced to hide to avoid discovery."

"I know all that," Potter said irritably.

"Naturally, but I wanted to be sure the Headmaster and the professors were up to speed. Anyway, what you obviously *did not* know was that before Jim managed to escape Borgin & Burkes, he noticed a small book on a shelf with a tag identifying it as a rare Occlumency text book. As he has had a very strong interest in learning that art, he succumbed to temptation and pinched it."

Snape snorted. "Shoplifting from Knockturn Alley. Such a fine example the boy's setting for his peers."

"That will do, Severus," said Dumbledore. "Peter, has Jim explained to you what's behind his sudden and intense interest in Occlumency?"

"Oh yes." The solicitor replied easily. "Originally, it was because he'd learned that there was a True Prophecy about him and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and you said you wouldn't reveal its contents to him in its entirety until he was able to defend his memories."

"Originally?"

"Yes..." Pettigrew hesitated. "No offense to the esteemed professors, but are Minerva and Severus aware of the full Prophecy? If not, it might be advisable for them to step outside for a while."

"Peter, surely you don't expect us to reveal the Prophecy to you just because you're Jim's legal adviser?"

"Oh that ship's already sailed, Albus. I know what Jim has already told me, and he learned most of the Prophecy last summer."

"WHAT?!" James bellowed.

"Really, James, if you and Lily were so bent on keeping the information from the boy, it would have behooved you to have not gotten into a shouting match about the topic over the kitchen table on his first night back."

Snape rolled his eyes contemptuously but refrained from commenting. Lily pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. "He's known ... since *May!* No wonder he's acted the way he has. The physical training. The extra tutoring with an emphasis on defense. And, of course, a strong interest in Occlumency. But why didn't he tell us?"

Peter took a deep breath as if he didn't want to upset the Potters. "Because ... he was afraid that you might have him Obliviated." James and Lily both gasped at the insinuation. "He believed that you might have at least considered that option rather than allow him to retain such dangerous knowledge. After what happened between him and You-Know-Who last year, he is utterly terrified of endangering his friends by acting out of ignorance again, but at the same time, he's equally terrified of someone reading what he knows of the Prophecy in his thoughts and delivering that information to You-Know-Who. Hence, Occlumency. And

when he basically tripped over what appeared at first glance to simply be a standard Occlumency primer, it must have seemed like Providence."

By that point, Snape was beginning to feel nauseous. "Do you require my presence any further, Headmaster? I imagine Lord Potter won't want me here for any detailed discussion of the Prophecy. And since I can see how this is all going to play out, I have no desire to waste any more time waiting on the denouement."

"And what is that supposed to mean, Snape?" said James in annoyance.

"It means that you've finally constructed a plausible interpretation of events which allows the Golden Child to pretend he's been a hero, albeit a '*misguided one*,' this whole time. And moreover, an interpretation which also conveniently omits the fact that he's a thief and a violent thug who was on his way to becoming a psychopath when '*the Greasy Dungeon Bat*' intervened to save him from himself."

"Spare me your sanctimony, Sni... Snape. Your hatred for my son has been obvious since his first day at school."

"No more obvious, Potter, than your own hatred for your *other* son. Or did you think your feeble efforts at rapprochement were fooling *anyone*?"

"Enough!" said Dumbledore forcefully. "We are not here to talk about Harry."

"Of course not," spat Snape. "Preserving both the reputation and tender feelings of the Boy-Who-Lived is paramount. Harry's just the one *someone is trying to kill*!"

A silence fell on the room. Jim and Lily looked abashed, while Peter studied his fingernails as if debating whether it was time for a manicure.

"Severus," Dumbledore said tiredly. "We *know* Harry's life is in danger, although we have no way of determining who is responsible or why he is being targeted or indeed anything other than the fact that a rogue house elf is somehow being used as an assassin. As soon as we've resolved this issue with Jim, James and I will move on to the question of what protections can be afforded Harry and how the investigation into the attacks against him should be pursued."

"And will anyone *else* from the Auror Corps be privy to that conversation? Since, after all, Lord Potter has a rather obvious conflict of interest?"

"You think it's *me*?" said James in amazement. "You think *I'm* trying to kill Harry?"

"Of course not, that would be silly of me," Snape replied silkily. "It's not as though you've treated the boy appallingly since he was a year old and more recently have publicly stated a desire to replace him as Heir with your other son, the Death Eater trainee. I can't *imagine* what I was thinking."

James shot up out of his chair, but before he could act, Dumbledore actually fired off a firecracker from his wand to get everyone's attention. "Enough, both of you. For now, I think Peter might have the right idea. We will need to discuss the Prophecy and what young Jim knows about it before we can attend to anything else. Severus, Minerva, perhaps it would be a good idea if you stepped out. I'll send for you if I need you."



With a sneer, Snape departed, followed by McGonagall. Once outside, she called out to the Potions Master.

"Severus, would you perhaps be interested in coming by my office. I could use a cup of tea. And some conversation."

"I doubt I would be a good conversationalist at the moment, Deputy Headmistress."

"I think that might depend on the topic. I think you might have much to say about ... the propriety of James Potter leading the investigation into these attacks on Harry. Perhaps you and I could explore ... some alternative approaches."

Snape stopped and considered his fellow professor. "You would ... explore such *alternative approaches* behind the Headmaster's back?"

"I believe the Headmaster is genuinely concerned for young Harry. But I also believe that Jim Potter's status as the Boy-Who-Lived and the role he will inevitably play in the fight against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named sometimes blind him to his duties as Headmaster for *all* of Hogwarts' students. Much as the fight against Voldemort blinded him ... and *me* to the need for fairness to all our students when you were a student here."

Snape sighed. "I forgave you for that years ago, Minerva." Then, he smirked. "Mind you, I did notice your failure to carry out your threat to turn James into a mouse and feed him to Mrs. Norris after he called me *Snivellus* this morning."

She scoffed. "Well, *obviously*, I wouldn't have done it *in front of everybody!* Besides, Mrs. Norris is indisposed at the moment."

He chuckled darkly as the two made their way to her office.

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***The "Meeting Room"***

***4:00 p.m.***

*Harry Potter,*

*I would be extremely grateful if you would do me the courtesy of meeting with me for a brief exchange of ideas in the Small Conference Room on the 1 st Floor just to the left of the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons. I give you my Solicitor's Oath that I will work no ill upon you nor perform any magic against you without your express consent during our meeting. I await you at four o'clock.*

*Sincerely,*

*Peter Pettigrew, Esq.*

Harry stopped to reread the note that one of the Gryffindors had delivered to him in the Library. He was reasonably confident that Pettigrew's oath (even if casually given in a note like this) would prevent him from any harmful action, but he was still cautious. And so he'd informed both Neville and Blaise of his meeting and told them to send the cavalry if he didn't contact them by 4:30 and to check him thoroughly for "weird behavior" even after. Thus prepared, Harry opened the door and stepped into the room where Pettigrew was sitting on the opposite side of a small table still in his golf tweeds. There was a empty chair across from the solicitor waiting for him.

"Ah, Harry. Thank you so much for coming. And for being so punctual as well! A rare and valuable character trait that will serve you well as you grow older."

"You wished to see me, Mr. Pettigrew."

"Oh please, call me Peter. We're practically family even if you've been regrettably estranged for far too long."

Harry nodded guardedly and walked to the table. Immediately, he noticed that Pettigrew's wand was sitting on the table at a 45-degree angle with the tip pointed away from him.

"I asked you here, Harry," the man said, "to present to you what we in the Magical Lawyering trade refer to as a *Confidential Offer*. If you agree to hear what I have to say, then you will be not be able to repeat it to anyone save your own oathbound solicitors, who themselves will be bound not to reveal it to anyone else. This is a common practice in wizarding legal services. In fact, as a concept, it is quite common in *Muggle* legal affairs though, of course, their confidential offers aren't protected by magic. It's a useful technique when two opposing sides realize that they both have much to lose from continued disagreement and so both seek out what's called a *negotiated settlement*."

"Why aren't James and Lily here?" Harry said.

"Because frankly, there's no need for them to be here or even to know about this meeting. I'm not just the Potters' solicitor, Harry. I'm also their Steward and Proxy. That gives me both the power and the obligation to handle affairs that are best left outside the standard purview of a Wizengamot Lord and his Lady. I'm sure you understand."

Harry nodded. "You make sure James's hands stay clean."

Peter nodded. "Crudely put, but essentially accurate. With that in mind, if you'd like to hear what I have to say - with

no obligations on your part save discretion, I assure you – simply place your wand across mine."

Harry studied Pettigrew for several seconds trying to appraise the other man. Then, with a casual flick of his wrist, he popped his wand and laid it perpendicular across Pettigrew's before taking the seat opposite from him. Pettigrew smiled with what most people would have described as warmth and charm. The word Harry would have used was *predatory*. For his own part, Harry immediately felt a faint trace of magic very similar to a secrecy oath the second his wand touched the other wizard's but otherwise nothing unexpected happened.

"Thank you for indulging me, Harry. Now before I get to the actual offer, I want to make one thing perfectly clear: Your father *loves* you. I know you think that's impossible in light of the awful life his choices have forced upon you, but I promise you that it's true. If things had played out differently, I truly believe James would be thrilled to have you as his Heir, even in place of Jim. Indeed, it might be to the benefit of the Boy-Who-Lived to have an older brother who could look after family affairs and free him up to pursue his destiny."

"You know," said Harry, "I said nearly the *exact same thing* on the first day I met Jim. Before I got Sorted and the whole family turned against me."

"Yes, well, as we both know, things *did not* play out differently. You were Sorted into Slytherin. And James is very, *very* against the idea of a Slytherin becoming Lord Potter. To the point of it being non-negotiable, I'm afraid."

"Well, I don't presume to know as much about the law as you, Mr. Pettigrew..."

"*Peter*, please."

Harry paused for a second. "Honestly, I think I prefer '*Mr. Pettigrew*.' Keeps things at arm's length. Anyway, from what meager studies I've made ... I don't see that there's very much James *can* do about my eventually becoming Lord Potter."

Peter smiled indulgently. "Well, *Harry*, there is one thing he can do: *live*. After all, James was only twenty when you were born. Barring illness, accident and the odd Death Eater attack, James can conceivably live for well over a century or more before you might even have a chance to inherit his estate. And in the meantime, well, he's obligated to see to your education, but not necessarily here at Hogwarts. You know, a Half-Blood like yourself might find things a bit more *challenging* at Durmstrang."

Harry was silent, and so Pettigrew continued.

"Not to mention the authority he's allowed to exercise over your marital choices. For example, James is completely within his rights to sign you up to a marriage contract that's beneficial to the family ... even if your partner is, say, twenty years older than you and of a decidedly disagreeable disposition. Now to be honest, neither of those options are on the table ... yet. But you'll be fifteen before we know it, and as your transition to Heir Apparent draws near, I suspect he'll be a good bit more desperate. Not to mention, a good bit more ... amenable to advice from me that he wouldn't be ready for today."

"Undoubtedly," said Harry with only a little tightness in his voice. "But I believe you described this as a Confidential Settlement Offer, not a Confidential Threaten Harry Session. I haven't heard any offers yet."

"Straight and to the point. I like that. If you become Heir Apparent, the Potter Family Trust is obligated to pay you a bare minimum monthly stipend roughly equivalent in today's money to the salary of a junior Ministry clerk in a mid-level department. You won't starve, and if you also have gainful employment, you'll live quite comfortably, if not in luxury. But you won't be able to touch the bulk of the estate while James is alive, which in light of your respective ages, will likely be most of *your* life. As an alternative to a lifetime of middle class drudgery and strife followed by a decade or two of wealth when you're too old to enjoy it, I offer you the following: a lump sum payment of 2 million galleons, plus the deed to any one Potter estate of your choice other than Potter Manor, plus an ironclad guarantee that James will pay for whatever education you choose and that he will not interfere in your marital choices. In exchange, all you have to do is decline the status of Heir Apparent and disclaim the Potter Wizengamot Seat."

Harry was silent for several seconds. "It's an ... interesting offer, Mr. Pettigrew. But I'm curious. If I disclaim the Potter Seat, what happens to it if my dear brother Jim *isn't* around to claim it. I mean, being the Boy-Who-Lived is a pretty stressful and fairly dangerous job from what I've seen. *Anything* could happen to him before he graduates. Well, *if* he graduates. I mean, my little brother isn't even halfway through his Second Year, and there's already talk of *expulsion*. Maybe *he's* the one you should be looking at transferring to Durmstrang. *In fact*, once the Hogwarts parents find out about his experiences with the Death Eater training regimen, he may be forced to leave even before he's expelled."

Pettigrew scowled for barely a second before relaxing back into his usual amiable smile. "Oh, I'm not worried about that, Harry. I'm sure this misunderstanding about the

Occlumency book will be cleared up in the press without any injury to Jim's reputation."

Harry sniffed. "Oh, of course. I'd forgotten about that. I suppose your *press secretary* is rewriting history as we speak."

"Press ... secretary?" Peter asked as if unfamiliar with the term.

"No? I guess that means *Rita Skeeter* doesn't have any *official* title within your organization."

Peter's eyebrows rose, and then he smiled even more broadly. It was surprisingly much more genuine than the smiles he'd been gifting Harry since this meeting started. "*Harry knows I've got something on Rita,*" he thought to himself with quiet amusement, "*and he's confident enough that he doesn't care if I know that he knows. This is actually kind of fun.*"

"Now, Harry, whatever makes you think I have even the slightest influence over someone like Rita Skeeter?" he said aloud in an amused voice.

"Well, for starters, there's the fact that she all but accused me of attacking Jim's Birthday fete with that cursed train when we now know that *I* was the intended target the whole time. One of three attempts on my life since July, in fact. Since we're *just talking*, do you know anything about *that*, Mr. Pettigrew?"

The older man didn't respond. He simply reached over and slid his own wand out from under Harry's and put it into his pocket. Immediately, the boy retrieved his own wand. "I think we've reached the limits of negotiation today, Harry, so it's best we stop before someone says something too ...

provocative." With that Pettigrew rose and stepped around the table before looking down at Harry.

"I've made my offer, Harry. I do hope you will give it serious consideration."

"I'll consider it. And the spirit in which it was offered."

Peter nodded and then headed towards the door before stopping halfway and turning back.

"You know, I must say – I really do regret that circumstances have forced us into an antagonistic posture. I haven't danced like this in years. Most wizards aren't clever enough to keep up with the rhythm." And with that, Peter Pettigrew walked out of the room, idly whistling an old Muggle tune as he left.

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### ***The Prince's Lair*** ***5:30 p.m.***

Harry stalked into the Lair wearing an unusually cold expression with a concerned Blaise and Theo close behind. Marcus was already there studying.

"Come on, Harry," said Blaise. "Spill it. Something happened during your meeting with Pettigrew that has you upset."

"I'm fine," said Harry tersely.

Blaise and Theo looked at each other uneasily. "Okay, see, that's *bad*," said Theo.

Harry did a double-take. "How is it *bad* to say that I'm *fine*?"



Blaise spoke up. "It's bad because you're near the transition point from a Second Level Occlumens to a Third Level. That's a dangerous point in any wizard's psychic development because the natural instinct will be to block out all unpleasant emotions and suppress bad feelings, and you don't have enough experience as an Occlumens to know when your shields are in danger of buckling."

Harry rolled his eyes. "And exactly what distress should I be worried about when I just told you *I'm fine*?"

Theo held up a hand and started counting off fingers. "A near death experience yesterday. An overnight hospital stay while you were recovering from a concussion *and* under the influence of mind-altering potions. An encounter with your estranged father that left you visibly upset *despite* your best efforts to hide it. *And* a 30-minute meeting with your father's creepy lawyer that *you won't tell us about*. Have I left anything out?"

He sighed in frustration. "Guys. I *can't* tell you about my meeting with Pettigrew, okay? Draw whatever conclusions from that you want."

"Translation: You met with Peter Pettigrew under *a secrecy vow*," Blaise said sourly. "This just keeps getting better all the time."

"What do you guys *want* from me?"

"We want you to go someplace quiet for *at least* an hour, clear your mind and *center* yourself," said Theo.

"That's not too much to ask for. *Right now* before something else happens to stress you out further."

Harry raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. If it will make you two happy. Just give me five minutes to talk to the

Hydra about Tom Riddle. I've been trying to get to this all day, alright?"

The other two boys acquiesced. At the far end of the table, Marcus Flint watched the whole exchange with a bemused expression. Harry turned towards the Hydra Throne and hissed at it in Parseltongue (an act which never failed to send shivers down Flint's back), presumably inquiring about the elusive Tom Marvolo Riddle.

The Hydra didn't respond.

After a few seconds, Harry hissed at it again. And then a third time with more urgency. At that point, Theo and Blaise started to become alarmed, and even Flint was concerned. Now visibly panicked, Harry started hissing angrily at the other chairs in the Lair, but the brass adder finials on the chair backs ignored him just as resolutely as the Hydra. Theo grabbed Harry by the shoulder, and the boy turned to him and started hissing incoherently.

"English, Harry! I don't speak Parseltongue! English!"

Harry was now shaking all over and breathing quickly. "The snakes ... won't answer me ... they won't..." Then, his eyes widened in horror as Madame Pomfrey's words from that morning came rushing back to him.

*If there is any damage at all, it will be to your temporal lobe, in that portion of your brain that handles speech and communication... if you're unable to understand something that someone else says ... to remember words that you understood before yesterday ... any other problems with communication...*

"P-Parseltongue!" he gasped. "The concussion! Brain damage. My Parseltongue's *gone!*"

And with that last unpleasant shock, Harry Potter went into a seizure.

With a yelp, Flint jumped out of his chair to catch Harry before he could fall to the ground.

"Shit! He's buckling! Hold him, Flint!" yelled Blaise.

"We need a Calming Draught! Who in the dorm has one?!" Theo exclaimed.

"In my room!" Flint said while gently lowering the convulsing Harry to the ground and trying to hold him steady. "Under the bed in a wooden box there are some Calming Draughts. Password to get in is *ouroboros*." As Theo darted out of the Lair, he turned his attention to Blaise. "What the hell's wrong with him?!"

"His Occlumency shields are buckling. Too many stressful events all happening at once and he hasn't been keeping up with his meditation exercises like he should. His emotional shields are collapsing, and all of the sudden, he's feeling ... *everything*! Harry! HARRY!" Blaise yelled directly into Harry's face and then slapped him hard across the cheek. "Listen to my voice! Remember your training! Get into the White Crystal Room! Forget everything but my voice and the White Crystal Room!"

Harry didn't respond to anything Blaise said. The boy grimaced in frustration. "Dammit, Harry! Hold his head steady, Flint." Then, Blaise put a hand on each side of Harry's head and pried the boy's eyelids open with his fingers, staring deep into Harry's green eyes.

"**LEGILIMENS**," he whispered. At that, Harry went rigid, and Blaise leaned forward, unblinking, until their foreheads touched. Then, Blaise let out a hiss of sudden intense pain as their minds joined and he started shouldering the

burden of Harry's raging emotions until his friend could gain control of himself.

Finally, Harry's seizure subsided just as Theo ran back into the room carrying Flint's stash of mildly illegal potions. Immediately, he pulled out one, yanked off the stopper and poured the contents down Harry's throat as Blaise slowly released his grip and stood up.

"Give him another," Zabini ordered. "He needs to rest and recover before he can meditate usefully." Theo hesitated for just a second before pulling out another vial as instructed and pouring it down Harry's throat. Harry's eyes fluttered as he struggled to stay awake. Then, for just a second, his brow furrowed, and he looked up at Blaise in bleary confusion.

"What's a Deathly Hallow?" he asked with a thick voice before lapsing into unconsciousness. Marcus and Theo turned to look at Blaise.

"I have absolutely *no idea* why he asked me that," Blaise said firmly. "No idea whatsoever."

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***Peter Pettigrew's Flat***  
***7:00 p.m.***

When Peter stepped out of the fireplace into his flat, he was still humming idly. Overall, it had been a productive day. He knew he'd have to dance a merry jig indeed to get his godson out of trouble while also concealing his role in getting the boy *into* trouble in the first place, but that part had gone off without a hitch. He'd also made his first volley towards removing Harry Potter as an obstacle to his plans. Well, his first volley not involving an assassination attempt, anyway, but that had really been more of a feint than a

volley. He also didn't seriously expect Harry to accept a mere two million galleons, either. He was sure the boy had some knowledge of the Potter family's net worth, but two million was a good opening bid. More importantly, he'd taken the boy's measure and felt better prepared about moving against him going forward. Harry Potter would be a challenge, but of a sort that Pettigrew rarely had the chance to enjoy.

But the true source of the solicitor's good humor came from one thing: the Prophecy. Amazing that when he woke up this morning, Peter Pettigrew had no clue that the Prophecy which had led to his Lord's defeat would simply fall into his lap. Granted, he'd had to swear an Unbreakable Vow to Dumbledore over the matter before the old man would reveal the exact wording, but there were ways around that. The Headmaster was a brilliant man and a powerful wizard, but he'd have been hopeless as a solicitor if today's demonstration of his oath-drafting skills was any indication.

After pouring himself a glass of Firewhiskey and shedding the jacket and golf cleats he'd been wearing all day, Peter made his way to his study. From a shelf, he pulled out a vintage gramophone LP and gingerly placed the vinyl disc onto an antique Victrola player which had been spelled to play Muggle records with a higher audio quality than the best modern Muggle stereo systems. As the unearthly sound of primal drums and animal-like cries began to fill the study, Peter sat down in his easy chair and propped his feet up on a leather ottoman, wriggling his toes inside his argyle golfing socks and thinking back to a conversation from so many years before.

*"Explain yourssself, Mr. Norvegicusss," the Dark Lord said in his sibilant voice. "You have brought me the meansss to*

*penetrate the Fideliusss that protectsss the Potter family, yet you now urge me to ssstay my hand. Why?"*

*"Because I sense an opportunity, my lord. The Prophecy, what we know of it, foretells of a child with the power to vanquish you but not necessarily of one who is fated to do so. Absent a guaranteed destiny that he is meant to oppose you, it is possible that the child can be turned to your service. A dark apprentice to serve as your right hand. If nothing else, it might be wise to take the child for study rather than risk triggering Fate's instrument."*

*The Dark Lord hesitated, and for a moment, Peter wondered whether he was about to be rewarded for his insight or tortured for his temerity. Voldemort did neither.*

*"Your wordsss have wisssdom, but when confronted with a True Prophecy, I choosse to leave nothing to chance. I will go thisss night to Godric'sss Hollow and end thisss threat to my new regime. And you, Mr. Norvegicusss, will accompany me."*

*Peter "Mr. Norvegicus" Pettigrew bowed his head obediently. Time would tell whether he was right or not.*

And he had been right. He knew that now. By trying to slay Jim Potter in his crib, Voldemort had both destroyed his own physical form and marked Jim as his equal, instilling in the boy a power beyond even Voldemort's comprehension.

*"And either must die at the hand of the other ... for neither can live while the other survives."*

Pettigrew snickered. Jim Potter was *his* to shape as he wanted. When the Dark Lord returned, he would gift the boy to his master in exchange for an even higher place in Voldemort's council. Unless, of course, Peter could both

identify and help his godson to master the mysterious power that the Dark Lord knew not, in which case Jim would be the instrument of Voldemort's destruction and the means by which Pettigrew *supplanted* his old master.

In the background, the record played on, the singer's gruff voice intruding over the drums. It was in 1976 that Sirius Black introduced a shy and sheltered Peter Pettigrew to Muggle rock 'n' roll, but even then, this particular song spoke to him in a way he couldn't fully comprehend. Not until years later, when events led him to realize his destiny and to finally understand why an old Rolling Stones tune felt like his own personal anthem. Peter began to sing along happily if somewhat tunelessly.

*"Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm a man of wealth and taste."*

# Escalation of Hostilities

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 29: Escalation of Hostilities

### *9 November 1992*

By the next morning, Harry had substantially recovered from the previous night's Occlumency-induced seizure. He awoke before dawn and spent an hour meditating in the Lair with Theo and Blaise watching over him to make sure he did it, followed by stern lectures from both friends about what he should and should not allow himself to feel for the next few days. After that, he was able to approach the prior night's shocking developments with a clearer head, and he quickly realized that his Parseltongue problems weren't *quite* as dire as he'd feared. He was still a Parselmouth, and he could still talk to snakes. To prove it, he conjured one with the Serpensortia Charm, and he could carry on a conversation with the snake he'd made, albeit it a boring, mostly one-sided conversation since conjured snakes lacked any real world experience. Harry had never actually gotten round to talking with a snake summoned via Serpensortia before, and he was disappointed to find that they were completely lacking in character compared to the rich and vibrant personalities of the Hogwarts serpents he'd come to know. Basically, all they cared about was doing whatever Harry summoned them to do and then going back to non-existence, which seemed to be their preferred state. He could still give such snakes fairly complex instructions, but on the whole, they were ... dull.



Based on his Serpensortia experiments, Harry assumed that he'd also be able to talk to living snakes, both mundane and magical, though it would be some time before he could confirm that officially, since most living snakes (even magical ones) hibernated during the cold Scottish winters. It was only the snake depictions, whether painted or sculpted, with whom he could no longer communicate, a terrible tragedy as far as Harry was concerned. Esme, Egbert, Arturo (the puff adder in the painting from the Slytherin Common Room), Siobhan (the grass snake that had warned him of the Weasley Terrors' prank the year before), and, of course, the ancient snakes who comprised the Hydra Throne. All of these had become his friends in the last year, even surly Nidhogg and the pompous runespoor triplets. And now, they were all silenced, perhaps forever. At a stroke, Harry had been stripped of his advisors, his spy network, and nearly half the people – and to a Parselmouth, snakes *are* people – with whom he talked on a regular basis. Even the Sentinel was silent, and while Harry could still command the door to the Prince's Lair to open with Parseltongue, it seemed the official password would continue to be "*Moldy Shorts*" for some time to come, a prospect that did not amuse Harry nearly as much as it did before.

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## ***ARE DEATH EATERS STALKING THE BOY-WHO-LIVED?***

***by Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent to the Daily Prophet (November 9, 1992)***

*Faithful readers will no doubt recall the shocking incident from last summer when unidentified Death Eater sympathizers attempted to assassinate Jim Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, with a cursed train similar in nature to the*

*diabolical toys once associated with the now-deceased Erasmus "The Toymaker" Wilkes (See summary of "Bloodbath at Potter Manor" on page 11.) Now comes further evidence of subtle and pernicious assaults against our beloved national icon, for this reporter has learned that persons unknown delivered a dark and possibly cursed book into the possession of an unwitting Jim Potter, one that had the potential of driving our young Jim mad ! Luckily, the eagle eye of his father, Senior Auror James Lord Potter (with the assistance of unnamed Hogwarts staff members) recognized the danger and removed the foul remnant of You-Know-Who's reign of terror before Jim suffered any serious harm.*

*The Daily Prophet is informed that Jim Potter is receiving treatment to ensure that there are no lasting effects. However, this second attack against the Boy-Who-Lived should be of great concern to all right-thinking wizards and witches. Without casting any aspersions, your humble reporter is troubled by the timing of these incidents, for not only is Jim's older brother Harry a prominent figure within Slytherin House (see "Harry Potter: A Dark Wizard Rising?" The Daily Prophet, September 5, 1991) but he is now joined by the mysterious Amaryllis Wilkes, daughter of the Toymaker himself who was only recently Sorted into Slytherin! While this reporter is loathe to blame a child for the sins of the parent, one must also consider the wise old saying "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." The Daily Prophet will continue to monitor these developments and hopes that the faculty and staff of Hogwarts will be on the lookout for any further deviltry.*

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By breakfast on Monday, the whole school had read Rita Skitter's account of what had happened to the Boy-Who-Lived. The short version was that he'd come into possession

of a Dark Magic book that had been affecting his mind in some way and that's why he'd been a bigger prat this year than the one before. He wasn't being punished for it, so most students assumed that it wasn't his fault, though those students already inclined to think poorly of the Git-Who-Lived were sure it was just a cover-up. More interesting was the internal debate about how Jim got the offending book, with a significant number of students believing Skeeter's insinuations that somehow *Harry* had engineered the whole thing as a way to embarrass or even injure his younger brother, a story merrily spread by Ron Weasley to anyone who would listen.

Harry finally read the offending article after threatening bodily harm to Blaise and Theo, both of whom initially refused to let him see it. As far as they were concerned, he was still recuperating from his breakdown and was not to use Occlumency to suppress his emotions for the next few days unless absolutely necessary. Consequently, if Harry read Skeeter's piece of yellow journalism, he would have to allow himself to *feel* it without any filters. His response was that (a) he was expecting it to be an attack on himself, (b) he would eventually piece everything together from the Hogwarts rumor mill anyway, and (c) better that he feel the emotion pain wrought by Skeeter's attacks than Blaise and Theo feel the physical pain of him clocking them on the ears, at which point Blaise muttered an expletive and handed over the paper. Harry thought the article was about what he'd expected after his conversation with Peter Pettigrew, but the brazenness with which Skeeter puffed up Jim was still breathtaking. "*Our beloved national icon?!"* And while most observers (or at least most non-Slytherin observers) would not have noticed any particular reactions from him as he read the article, Harry himself felt as though his displeasure was blazing brighter than the sun. Across the room, Jim and Ron were laughing at something, and

though they weren't looking at him, Harry could not suppress the wholly baseless suspicion that it was over Skeeter's article. He resolved to spend some time practicing ping-pong that afternoon before this evening's detention – he suddenly had a powerful desire to inflict some punishment on his twin, since apparently Jim was immune to it from any other source.

In other Occlucency-related news, Harry also received a note from the Headmaster himself, advising him that Jim had apparently learned most of the Prophecy the previous summer. Accordingly, Dumbledore would begin tutoring Jim in Occlumency himself, as the need to preserve the Prophecy's secrecy was paramount. He also encouraged Harry to continue his own studies and said that he would like to test Harry's defenses in January to see if he'd broken through to Level Three by then. If so, Dumbledore would reveal the Prophecy to him as well. Somewhat surprised that the old man seemed bent on keeping his word – and despite James's obvious opposition – Harry jotted down a polite response saying that he appreciated the notice and that he would be ready by January.

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### ***That afternoon***

Just after lunch, the Weasley Twins cornered Harry and asked rather urgently to speak with him in private. The three found an empty classroom, and Harry studied the Twins who seemed uncharacteristically upset.

"What's up, guys?"

"We, um, were wondering if you'd heard anything about one of the Slytherins ... pranking us?" said Mole aka George.

Harry laughed for just a second before he caught Non-Mole/Fred's angry glare and realized it was no laughing matter. "Okay, this is serious then. Tell me what happened."

With visible reluctance, George filled Harry in on what happened in the locker room after the Quidditch match, while Fred stood behind him fuming. Harry nodded.

"I see. Someone stole your stuff, including the Map. Incidentally, if you don't mind, could you tell me what the Map actually does?"

George looked at him in surprise, while Fred narrowed his eyes rather angrily. "You mean you don't know?" he asked in clipped tones.

"Honestly, no. All I knew was that you had an enchanted map of some kind that was activated by saying '*I solemnly swear I'm up to no good.*' I was bluffing on everything else." At that, both Twins looked at him crossly. "Guys, you were pranking me *every other day*. I had to do *something*. Anyway, what does the Map look like when it's deactivated?"

"Just an ordinary blank piece of parchment," said George. "If you try to write on it or use magic to force the password, it will insult you."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do. But I have to warn you. First of all, like you said, it's possible whoever took it already destroyed it without knowing what it was. And second, well, the sort of Slytherin who would write about you two being blood traitors isn't really the circle of Slytherins I run in. I mean, I have influence among the Quidditch team and the Second and First Years, but most of the upperclassmen still call *me* a blood traitor too. They'll just put up with a blood traitor who's rich, wins lots of House points, and is handy on

a broom. All that aside, I promise I'll do my best to find your Map if it still exists."

"Thanks, Harry," said George.

"Don't mention it, George."

Fred stiffened. "Hang on a minute," he said suspiciously. "We didn't tell you which of us was who. So how'd you know he was George."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Not from reading the Map, if that's what you're implying, *Fred*" he said archly. "More like pain-staking observation and investigation for over a year."

"Fred, drop it," said George firmly. "Harry, we'll be in touch."

Harry nodded as the Twins left. He had learned from Ginny that George was the Twin with a tiny mole next to his left eye. But once he could match names to faces, he'd found it surprisingly easy to tell them apart just by observing them for any length of time. For two people who could complete each other's sentences, there were very noticeable personality differences between the Weasley Terrors. In particular, Harry noted that Fred was invariably the first one to show anger or aggression in any interaction when sufficiently provoke or when under stress. Harry filed the conversation away and left the room, his thoughts turning to who could have stolen the Twins' beloved Map.

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### ***Still later, after Second-Year Potions***

Hermione waited somewhat nervously as the other students in the class filed out. She'd thought briefly about asking Harry or Neville to stay behind with her as Snape was her

most intimidating professor, but she was nearly thirteen and so decided there was no reason she couldn't face the man on her own. "*Gryffindor!*" as Harry would probably shout sarcastically. After a moment, Snape realized the girl had stayed behind.

"May I help you, Miss Granger?" he said in a tone suggesting that he had absolutely no particular desire to help her whatsoever.

She coughed lightly. "Um, yes sir. I, um, I was wondering if you could tell me if, er, you were familiar with any of these spells." With that, she handed a parchment upon which she had written the names of four spells: Muffliato, Levicorpus, Liberacorpus, and Sectumsempra. Snape studied the list and then glared at the girl in mounting fury.

"Where did you learn about these spells?" he asked angrily.

"From ... the Gryffindor Library, sir," she said nervously.

"From..." Snape said before pausing as Hermione's words sank in. His anger was quickly replaced with complete astonishment. "From the Gryffindor ... *Library?*" His expression indicated that he'd have thought it more probable for the girl to have found the spells while exploring Mars.

She coughed again. "Well, that's what the Gryffindors call it. It's actually a single bookcase with only six shelves, half of which are given over to old Quidditch magazines and back issues of Teen Witch Weekly. However, there are a few magic-related books there, one of which appeared to be an introductory text on Arithmancy."

"*Appeared*, Miss Granger?"

She coughed again and then blushed deeply. "Yes sir. I found it in October of last year. Upon closer inspection, it actually turned out to be a bound collection of ... well, pornographic materials with a fake cover." Snape raised an eyebrow, and Hermione blushed even harder. "Anyway, some old parchments fell out of the book. They consisted of a few pages of Charms descriptions and a note from someone calling himself Padfoot and writing to someone named Prongs. Apparently, Padfoot had stolen the Charms from someone called..." She took a deep breath. "Someone who they called ... Snivellus, sir."

Snape hissed at that, but she persevered. "I didn't make the connection until Lord Potter called you that the other day. I should have remembered from our very first Potions class when Jim called you by that name. Anyway, once I realized these spells were stolen from *you*, I wanted to turn them back in and apologize for making use of what I'm sure you consider to be proprietary magic."

Snape studied Hermione as he considered her words. "Do I understand you to mean that you have successfully *used* some of these spells, Miss Granger?"

"Only Muffliato," she said nervously. "And I've taught it to Harry Potter and a few others, but I didn't tell them where I found it. I've been studying Levicorpus, but I've also been busy with other projects and haven't gotten very far with it."

Snape shook his head in a mixture of annoyance and admiration. He'd perfected Muffliato as a Fourth Year student, and apparently the Granger girl had mastered it just from cribbed notes after just a few weeks as a First Year. How she'd avoided a Ravenclaw Sorting was an absolute mystery.



"Do you have the notes with you?" he asked. She nodded and handed them over. He studied them for a moment. After nearly twenty years, he knew enough about the Marauders to identify Sirius Black as the author and James Potter as the recipient, though he never had figured out the origins of their odd pet names for one another. Then, he turned back to the Granger girl.

"Five points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger. While your honesty is appreciated, it was incredibly foolhardy for you to have been researching spells from partial and illicitly obtained notes without knowing what the spells do. In particular, it appears the notes for Sectumsempra contained here are incomplete. Had you attempted that spell based on what you have here, you might well have killed someone."

At that, Hermione paled and her eyes widened.

"You will also have detention with me this Saturday." She nodded sadly, before he continued. "During which we will review both Levicorpus and Liberacorpus, two very useful Defense spells not widely known. Naturally, you will *not* share your knowledge of these spells with anyone else without my express consent. Understood?"

Her frown turned into a smile. "Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

In good spirits despite the point loss, Hermione practically skipped out of the classroom. Snape shook his head and sighed. "The Gryffindor *Library*," he snorted.

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## ***12 November 1992***

Harry was sitting in the Great Hall at lunchtime with his usual circle of friends when he noticed Hedwig fly in

majestically and head in his direction. The snowy owl landed gracefully next to him and held out a claw to which a small leather pouch was attached. There was a small tag that said the pouch was from the Tonks Clinic. Eagerly, Harry opened the pouch and extracted the contents: a pair of rectangular glasses with jet black frames. Hermione or Justin would have said they looked like Wayfarer frames, which were popular at the moment among Muggles, though Wayfarers typically were not ornamented with a tiny silver snake logo on each temple. Harry smiled and swapped his old circular "Potter" frames for the new pair.

"Ooo," said Daphne. "Very stylish."

"Stylish *and* functional," he replied. "These glasses are Charmed to be impervious to water and fog. They can resist most Summoning Charms and will never come off accidentally. And also..." He reached up and tapped the snake on his left temple twice. Instantly, the lenses tinted themselves black, as the glasses converted into sunshades.

"Neat," said Tracey appreciatively. "Do they do anything else?"

"Eh, a few minor odds and ends," said Harry evasively. Truth be told, he'd spent nearly 300 galleons on his new glasses which had every enchantment and magical mod that was legal for enchanted eye wear, but it was against his nature to reveal too many of his tricks to even his closest friends. After deactivating the "shades" function, Harry happened to glance up at the Head Table, where Lily was looking at him somewhat sadly. Between the hair products and his new glasses, Harry now looked quite different from his twin brother, a fact that obviously made Lily unhappy. He felt for her ... until he thought back over

Skeeter's article and other recent "family affairs." And then, he discovered that he didn't feel much for her at all.

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## ***25 November 1992***

Today, Lily's sadness was replaced with anger as she stormed into the faculty lounge on a mission. Snape, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout were all having tea in the center of the room. Gilderoy Lockhart sat off to one side with a book while nursing a mug of hot chocolate with whipped cream and sprinkles on top. Lily walked right over to the DADA instructor and put her arms on her hips as if prepared for a stern lecture.

"Professor *Lockhart*, I have just learned that the detentions you have held for both my sons for the last *three weeks* have involved liberal use of *Stinging Hexes*. Is this *true*?" With that accusation, the other teachers turned towards Lockhart, who sighed loudly and put his book away.

"I admit that my disciplinary technique does make use of the Stinging Hex at its absolute minimum setting, as an object lesson that I would think you as the Muggle Studies professor might appreciate."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" she asked angrily. She'd only found out that morning from a distraught Ron Weasley who was upset that Jim wouldn't go to either of his parents over Lockhart's "*abuse*." Ron had made the professor's use of the Stinging Hex out to sound much worse than what Lockhart was now describing, though he himself probably had gotten a garbled account from Jim.

"Simply that it was a Muggle expression that gave me the idea. '*Me against my brother; me and my brother against everyone else*.' My hope was that the two boys would

become angry at *me* for inflicting such an annoying and unpleasant punishment on them, and consequently, they would join forces against me. After all, they've both gotten quite good at ping-pong, and if they'd simply cooperated and agreed to play a slow, leisurely game and not actively try to score points on one another, neither of them would be subjected to the hex. Unfortunately, I'm afraid my strategy has failed so far, as they've only gotten more aggressive in their game play over past several weeks. On the bright side, they're game play *is* quite good. I'd put both Jim and Harry above everyone else on Team Counterstrike except young Finch-Fletchley who's had years more practice. In any case, your sons only have a few more days of detention, so you can set your mind at ease."

With that, Lockhart returned to his book, ignoring the still fuming parent.

"To be quite honest, Gilderoy," said Pomona Sprout, "I can't for the life of me see what this ... ping-pong has to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts. My Hufflepuffs who are involved are certainly enjoying the game, and young Finch-Fletchley has blossomed now that he has an activity where he can be a leader, but I still don't see the point of it all. Your other research teams are involved with warding, advanced potions, and NEWT-level Defense spells. Are you quite sure these ... ping-ponging students aren't being shortchanged in comparison?"

Lockhart patiently closed his book once more, turned to Pomona with a smile, and said one word. "Averto." Then, he went back to his reading.

"A... verto?" Sprout said the unfamiliar word slowly. "I don't understand ..." But before she could continue, Professor

Flitwick practically jumped out of his chair, startling the others.

"AH! AVERTO!" he shouted excitedly. "Of course! Severus! Do you see it?! AVERTO!" Then, the diminutive Professor began to laugh merrily. Snape narrowed his eyes slightly, but then, after a few seconds, his eyebrows rose fractionally, just enough to let the professors who truly knew him realize that he was genuinely surprised and impressed.

"Ah, yes," he said while nodding. "*Averno*. Pomona, I can assure you that Professor Lockhart's ping-pong exercises do in fact have a legitimate, if unconventional, pedagogical value. I would explain more clearly, but the good Professor has shown himself to be a bit of a showman. I wouldn't *dream* of spoiling whatever surprise he has for us."

Lockhart laughed. "Now that you mention it, Severus, the young men and women of Team Counterstrike have been working very hard. I suppose I should find some appropriate venue for them to demonstrate what they've learned." He paused and looked towards Snape and Flitwick speculatively. "Say, didn't Hogwarts used to have a dueling club?"

Flitwick's face broke out into a broad grin, while Severus's eyebrows rose just a fraction higher.

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**26 November 1992**

*From a notice posted on the bulletin boards in each House:*

***TO ALL HOGWARTS STUDENTS!***

***PROFESSOR GILDEROY LOCKHART***

***is pleased to announce that on December 17 th at  
8:00 p.m. there will be a***

***DUELING EXHIBITION***

***By the members of Team Counterstrike***

***followed by an organizational meeting for***

***THE HOGWARTS DUELING ASSOCIATION!***

***Punch and Light Appetizers to be served.***

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***28 November 1992***

The last joint detention for Harry and Jim was also the most brutal, and if Justin Finch-Fletchley could have seen it, he'd have been amazed, and perhaps a bit intimidated, by how aggressively and proficiently the Potter Twins approached the game. For a solid hour, the ping-pong ball flew back and forth at incredible speed. Relatively few points were scored, but it wasn't for lack of effort. Finally, the detention came to an end, and Lockhart called for a break. Harry took advantage and slammed the ball past the distracted Jim's defense. The Boy-Who-Lived let out a gasp of pain, and then fixed Harry with an angry glare.

"Well, gentlemen," said Lockhart. "This concludes your four weeks of joint detention. Slytherin Potter, although you are not an official member of Team Counterstrike, your progress at this game has been quite remarkable. If you are interested, I would like to formally invite you to the first meeting of the Hogwarts Dueling Club which is scheduled for December 18th. That is when I will reveal to Team

Counterstrike the reason I've had them practicing this game since September. What say you?"

Harry nodded speculatively. "Assuming my schedule permits, sir, I'd be delighted."

"Good, good. Now, before you go, since this is our last session together, I do have one question. Was there ever a moment when it occurred to either of you that if the two of you got together, you could agree to play a nice, slow game and not try to score any points, thereby avoiding the Stinging Hexes completely?"

Jim eyes widened as the idea had never occurred to him. "Honestly, sir ..."

"Ten minutes into the first session, sir," Harry interrupted in clipped tones. "That's when I realized that the point of this exercise was to help me and Jim to get over our ... differences." Jim looked over at him in surprise. Harry sniffed. "It would have been obvious to any Slytherin, I think."

"Hmm," said Lockhart slowly. "And yet, you did not actually *try* to work with your brother to avoid getting stung."

Harry shrugged. "I made the mental calculation that avoiding a few minor stings wasn't worth whatever other aches and pains I'd suffer from trying to get along with Jim, even for just one hour a day. Is there anything else, sir?"

Lockhart shook his head no with a slightly saddened expression, and the two boys left. Outside Jim called out to Harry.

"So you actually knew the first night that Lockhart wanted us to work together, and you actively chose not to?" he asked. "Do you really think it's that impossible for you and me to work together?"

Harry turned and stared at Jim for a few seconds before speaking. "*I hate you. I hate you. I wish you'd stayed with the Dursleys and died,*" he quoted in a flat monotone voice.

Jim blushed and looked away, unable to meet his brother's gaze. "That was the Occlumency book talking. I ... I would never ..." He trailed off helplessly.

"Was it the Occlumency book last Christmas when the Mirror of Erised told you your fondest wish was that I'd never been born?"

"Harry..."

"No, stop it. It should be obvious even to a lunkhead Gryffindor like you that we're never going to be brothers. We're never even going to be friends. If we try very, very hard, it *may* be possible for us to *not be enemies*. To that end, I propose the following. You go your way, and I'll go mine. We don't talk to one another except when required by class work. We don't even exchange Christmas cards. Does that work for you? Good."

And with that, Harry turned and walked away without even giving Jim a chance to respond. The other boy stood there for several seconds before wiping his thumb and forefinger across his eyes and then heading the other way towards Gryffindor Tower.

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***Thirty Minutes Later...***



*"Ten minutes into the first session, sir," Harry interrupted in clipped tones. "That's when I realized that the point of this exercise was to help me and Jim to get over our ... differences." Jim looked over at him in surprise. Harry sniffed. "It would have been obvious to any Slytherin, I think."*

*"Hmm," said Lockhart slowly. "And yet, you did not actually try to work with your brother to avoid getting stung."*

*Harry shrugged. "I made the mental calculation that avoiding a few minor stings wasn't worth whatever other aches and pains I'd suffer from trying to get along with Jim, even for just one hour a day. Is there anything else, sir?"*

"FREEZE!" said Lockhart firmly. At that, Harry and Jim both froze as solid as statues. Carefully, Hermione, Ginny, and Penelope Clearwater walked over to study the Potter Twins while Luna remained next to Professor Lockhart. The first three had clearly never been inside a pensieve before, as they were still amazed at the idea of walking around in one of someone else's personal memories. Hermione, in fact, felt oddly uncomfortable, as if she was in some way invading her best friend's privacy by viewing him in this manner. Luna seemed blase, though whether because she was familiar with pensieves or simply immune to their wonder was her secret alone.

"Well, Miss Lovegood, what are your immediate thoughts?" inquired the Professor.

"Well, Jim's *big* wrackspurt is smaller, but it's still there. And each of their nargles still *hate* the other's. Harry was right. They would *never* have worked together in the way you suggested. I think it would take a matter of life or death for them to ever willingly cooperate."

"Excuse me, Professor," Hermione interrupted. "Why exactly did you want us to watch your memory of Harry and Jim playing ping-pong? "

"Oh, it's not my memory, Miss Granger. It's Miss Lovegood's. I had her sitting in the back watching under an invisibility spell. I wanted to see what you could detect when looking through her eyes."

All three girls looked around the room. "I don't see anything out of the ordinary," said Ginny. "Sorry, Luna," she added apologetically.

"Don't apologize just yet, Miss Weasley. Come over here." Ginny moved to where Lockhart directed. She was now facing the wall and standing roughly even with Jim Potter. "Now, keep facing the wall but slowly shift your eyes to the left. Look at Jim Potter but *just out of the corner of your eye*."

Ginny did as directed. Then, she gasped and shook her head. "Whoa!" she exclaimed.

"What?" asked Penelope. "Please don't tell me you saw a nargle."

"I ... don't know *what* I saw, but just for a second, there were these ... *things* both around Jim and ... I think *inside him* too!"

One by one, the other girls took turns looking at Jim from the same vantage point, and both had the same reaction. Hermione actually looked slightly ill after her first visual encounter with what Luna insisted were nargles and wrackspurts. She couldn't see anything well enough to give a description, but something was definitely there. Something ... disturbing.

"And you see these things all the time?" she asked Luna with a hint of urgency. The girl nodded pensively as if she knew the things she'd taken for granted her whole life were unsettling to her friends.

"And what are your impressions of those things that you can only see out of the corner of your eye?" Lockhart asked of the three girls.

None of them spoke at first. Finally, Ginny did. "It felt ... unnatural. I'm sorry, Luna, but it was like we were seeing something ... something that *wasn't meant to be seen*."

"Quite possibly an accurate impression," Lockhart said. "I have felt the same. And if that impression is correct, then future study may be curtailed. *But* until then, we shall persevere in the manner of the best Muggle scientists and investigators. Between now and our next session, I want all four of you to meet up a few times and brainstorm. How is it possible for Miss Lovegood to see these things but not the rest of us? What phenomena might allow us to see them in her memories but only indirectly? What is the source for this feeling of *dread* that we all feel when viewing these things merely out of the corner of our eyes? Science and magic! Both *MARCH ON!*"

Lockhart finished dramatically with his fist up in the air in a dramatic pose. The four members of Team Mysterioso simply stared at him until he sheepishly brought his arm back down.

"Ahem. Anyway, before we break for this week, there's one other matter. Miss Lovegood, you indicated previously that there was something wrong with Harry Potter as well as his brother. Can you give us any more impressions of the elder Potter to evaluate over the next week?"

Slowly and guardedly, Luna walked over to the frozen memory of Harry Potter and studied his face carefully. "No," she finally said. "I can't see it."

"So there's nothing wrong now..." Lockhart spoke but Luna interrupted him.

"No, I mean... it's *there* but ..." She turned and looked at the others in frustration. "It's not *letting* me see it! I can only see the big gaping hole left by its absence!"

The others all stared at the girl who had a deeply troubled look on her face.

"Well, *that's* not creepy *at all*, is it?" said Ginny, surprising Hermione who had not expected the younger girl to have mastered Harry's brand of sarcasm so quickly.

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***16 December 1992***

***4:00 a.m.***

Cassius Warrington awoke with a start. Sitting up in his bed in the Fourth Year Slytherin dorm, he looked around for a few seconds and then noticed the envelope lying on his pillow next to where he'd been sleeping. On it were only two words: "A Friend." Warrington shuddered. He knew none of his dorm mates was his mysterious "Friend," and it was supremely unnerving that someone could sneak into his dorm room and leave a message so easily. Summoning a small Lumos to read by, Warrington opened the envelope. The letter from inside was succinct.

**TOMORROW AFTERNOON**

Warrington grinned in anticipation.

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**17 December 1992**

**4:30 p.m.**

Harry was not enjoying the afternoon's Quidditch practice at all, and neither were his fellow Slytherins. The temperatures had fallen quite a bit below freezing, and there were light snow flurries, harbingers of the blizzard that was scheduled to hit the school later that night. But Flint was insistent that the team get in at least one cold weather practice before the end of term. They were playing Ravenclaw in February, and from experience, Flint knew that game would be bitterly cold. Even he agreed, however, that the practice should be cut short when the snowfall picked up enough to hinder visibility. The seven Slytherin players flew to the ground and jogged to the locker rooms for a hot shower and a change of clothes before dinner.

As invigorating as the hot shower was, Harry rushed to get through with it as quickly as possible. Despite all the confidence he'd developed since coming to Hogwarts, he was still well aware of how small and underdeveloped he was compared to the Sixth and Seventh Year students who made up the bulk of the team. And while his teammates were generally diplomatic enough not to comment on his various scars, he still knew that they could see them. Besides, with his glasses off and in a steam-filled shower, Harry was half-blind, a state which always left him edgy and paranoid. And so it was that Harry was, as usual, the first out of the shower. He quickly took a towel from the table next to the shower entrance and dried himself off before wrapping it around his waist.

For once, his timing was impeccable, as a loud *crack* made him jump. Simultaneously, all of his teammates in the

showers yelped in shock as the hot water suddenly turned ice cold, and the stove heater in the corner went out. Confused and unable to see through his own blurry vision, Harry made his way over to the lockers. But his eyesight wasn't so bad that he was unable to see what had happened. The lockers containing all the boys' clothes (both Quidditch gear and regular clothing), their wands, and even Harry's expensive new glasses *were now gone*. And in place of the lockers were letters written on the wall in glittering gold and fiery red.

**ENJOY YOUR RUN BACK TO THE CASTLE  
HOPE YOU DON'T GET FROSTBITE  
GRYFFINDORS RULE  
SLYTHERINS DROOL**

As Harry rubbed his eyes trying to bring the blurry world around him into focus, the rest of the Slytherins gathered around him, each pulling towels around them more tightly as the temperature in the room began to drop noticeably. Draco, wearing one towel around his waist and another over his head and shoulders, moved next to Harry to better read the words inscribed on the wall. Harry turned to him with a sardonic expression.

"Well, Malfoy, you're going to look *awfully silly* running all the way back to the castle to get all our clothes."

Draco was not amused.

Fifteen minutes later, having exhausted all other options and fairly certain that no one at the school would notice their absence before they froze to death, the seven Slytherins wrapped themselves up in towels as best they could and then took off for the quarter-mile hike back up to the castle through six inches of snow and freezing

conditions. Harry fell twice and had to be helped back up by the two Beaters. By the time they made it to the front doors of the castle (the side entrances judged too far given the weather), all seven were shivering violently from the cold. The good news was that the doors to the Great Hall were closed for the evening meal and the hallway was almost deserted. The bad news was that "*almost*" included Caretaker Filch, who was on them almost immediately and shouting incoherently.

"WHAT IS THIS?! HOW DARE YOU *DEFILE* THE CASTLE THIS WAY!" he bellowed at the group.

"We're n-not de-defiling *anything*, you old fool! Th-th-this is us nearly fr-fr-freezing to death!" stammered Flint through chattering teeth as he tried to push his way past Filch before the Caretaker's shouting summoned a crowd. Unfortunately, he wasn't fast enough. The doors to the Great Hall opened and several Gryffindors came through, including Jim, Ron, and Colin Creevey. Ron was apparently trying to sell Jim on the idea of letting Creevey take his pictures for some sort of *fan club* to improve the tarnished reputation of the Boy-Who-Lived when he noticed the Slytherin Quidditch team standing in the foyer wearing nothing but towels and practically blue with cold.

"HEY EVERYBODY!" the red-headed Gryffindor yelled at the top of his lungs. "THE SLYTHERIN TEAM'S GONE STREAKING!" From inside the Great Hall, there was the sound of students getting up to see what the commotion was about. Despite himself, Jim laughed at the sight. Meanwhile, Ron nudged Colin, and the boy raised the camera he seemed to carry everywhere and began snapping photos of the embarrassed Slytherins.

Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, Flint yelled for his team to head to the dungeon while he stayed behind to divert Filch ... and make a few threats against Creevey if those pictures ever saw the light of day. Following his commands, the six Slytherins ran off, the sounds of laughter, whistles and cat-calls from their fellow students echoing behind them. Miles Bletchley actually slipped on some wet floor and lost his towel for a few seconds, leading to even more laughter. Minutes later, the team entered the Slytherin Common Room, where they were all surprised to find the missing locker waiting for them in the middle of the room. A few Housemates were present and wondering what a gym locker was doing there ... until the half-naked Quidditch team entered, a sight which heartily amused some of the Snakes until threats of violence from the Beaters wiped the smiles from their faces. Harry quickly opened his own locker and was relieved to find his wand and his new glasses on the top shelf where he'd left them. Among the other students present were Missy Bulstrode (who didn't even try to resist ogling the team members) and Cassius Warrington.

"I suppose there's a logical explanation for this bit of ... exhibitionism," he asked, suppressing a smirk.

"Aye," said Peregrine Derrick angrily. "Some Gryffindor tossers stole our clothes and wands and left us to *bloody freeze to death!*"

Warrington snickered and began walking around the locker while the Quidditch players were pulling their clothes out and heading up to their dorms.

"Say, Bulstrode," he said from behind the locker. "Come have a look at this."



The prefect followed Warrington behind the lockers. Out of curiosity, Harry followed as well, his interest in finding out who was responsible for his predicament overriding his embarrassment about his attire (or lack thereof). On the back of the freestanding metal lockers, someone had drawn a fairly impressive set of interlocking runes. Harry had no idea what they meant as he wouldn't start Ancient Runes for another year, but he knew Missy was in the Seventh Year Runes class and also Lockhart's rune-intensive study group, Team Backdoor. He looked at her expectantly and was not disappointed. After studying the runes for a few seconds, she smiled maliciously.

"We've got'em," she said with a grin. "Warrington, go find Snape."

"Why me?" he asked petulantly.

"Because you've got pants on, idiot. Now go!" Warrington made a face and then headed towards the door.

"What is it, Missy?" asked Harry.

"This rune-scheme is from Team Backdoor. There's only seven of us on that team ... and only one Gryffindor. And since we're all working on different but interconnected projects, I can recognize who had this sequence. I knew it was only a matter of time before *the Weasley Terrors* would take advantage of what we were learning for some stupid prank."

Harry started to say that George and Fred wouldn't have done anything like this, but then he remembered about their lost map which they'd blamed on Slytherin House, not to mention the way Slytherin pummeled them in their last Quidditch match, and he figured that, yes, they very possibly might have done something *exactly* like this. "So

*much for the safe list,"* he thought ruefully. Harry ran to get dressed so he could return before Snape arrived. Over the next half-hour, everyone on the Quidditch team had gotten another hot shower, changed into dry clothes, and been force-fed Pepper-Up Potions and cups of hot herbal tea to prevent them getting sick. Missy had reviewed her own notes with Professor Snape and made a copy of the runes on the back of the locker prior to Snape vanishing it back to the locker room.

Finally, he was ready to hear what the team members had to say. Almost to a man, they blamed the prank on the Wesley Twins. The only dissenter was Harry told the group what George and Fred had told him about someone stealing George's project notes from the Gryffindor locker room during the November 7th match.

"After what the Terrors did to you, you actually *defend them*?" Warrington said incredulously.

"I'm not *defending* anyone, Warrington. I'm merely relaying what they told me. If it was the Terrors, they undoubtedly think it's payback. After all, both pranks involved Quidditch locker rooms and theft of personal property. It would have been ... poetic for them to have done this. But if it *wasn't* them, it wouldn't surprise me a bit for someone in another House to prank us and frame them, and vice versa. Probably a Ravenclaw. They're only twenty House points behind us, so they've got a motive to put us and the Gryffs at each other's throats. I mean, if *I* were ever inclined to get into a prank war, I'm pretty sure part of any prank I played would be to frame someone else for it. Anyway, I assume you can compare the runework on the locker with George Weasley's work and that of the rest of the Backdoor members so we'll soon know for sure."

"Such investigations will be attended to first thing in the morning," said Snape firmly. "For now, hold off on any retaliation. And *certainly* do nothing to embarrass the House such as descending to the level of ... *a prank*. If you wish to avenge yourselves on Gryffindor House, you will have your chance to do so later this evening during the Dueling Club session. *However*, you will do so the proper way – by demonstrating your dominance of the dueling floor and not through childish hooliganism. Am I understood?"

The Slytherins grumbled their acquiescence and then headed to the kitchens for a quick, late supper before the dueling club meeting started. Harry, in particular, had someone he was planning on dominating on the duel floor. In fact, as he thought back to the Git laughing at his earlier embarrassment, Harry wasn't really planning on dominating ... so much as crushing.

## Chapter End Notes

AN1: The usual Luna tropes are either that Luna is crazy and there's no such thing as nargles OR that Luna is a seer of some description who interprets her visions in the form of invisible creatures. My subversion is that the things she sees are real (for some definitions of "real") but that only she can see them ... and that being able to see them is quite possibly a bad thing. A clearer explanation of what's going on with Luna is forthcoming.

# The Dueling Club

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***CHAPTER 30: The Dueling Club***

***17 December 1992***

***8:00 p.m.***

The first meeting of the Dueling Association was open to all Hogwarts students, though if interest were high enough, future sessions would most likely be broken up by class year. Most of Slytherin House came in a show of mutual support for Harry and Draco after the prank played on the Quidditch team earlier that evening. Of course, "support" among Slytherins was conditional, and Harry felt strongly that he needed to make some sort of power play during the meeting to maintain any influence over the House's response to what had happened.

The Great Hall had been cleared of all furniture except one long table in the center of the room which would serve as the dueling platform and a few smaller tables set up in the corners for refreshments. As the Slytherins entered, a group of Gryffindors centered around Jim laughed openly and pointed at the Quidditch Team members. Harry's own Gryffindor friends were not among them. Neville was in the Library trying to catch up on a Transfiguration essay, while Hermione and Luna were off doing something or other for *Team Mysterioso*. Harry paused and then walked over to the Gryffindors.

"Jim, a word please?" he said firmly before walking away from the group towards an empty area. With some reluctance, Jim followed him.

"Yes, Harry?" Jim asked guardedly.

"I've been thinking about what I said after our last detention with Lockhart. I was wrong. I see that now."

Jim blinked in surprise at the unexpected comment. "So you *do* think it's possible for us to be more like brothers?"

Harry laughed bitterly. "Of course not! No, I mean I no longer think it's possible for us to avoid being *enemies*."

"What?! Harry, is this because of what happened earlier in the foyer...?"

"In part. I don't think you were personally responsible for the prank played on us – you certainly don't have the skill for it, though you might have been involved. No, mainly, I've just been thinking about you and me for some time now – ever since the day after our Quidditch match, in fact – and I've honestly just come to the conclusion that I will never have any lasting happiness of any kind so long as you're on hand to *ruin it for me!*"

Jim was silent for several seconds as he absorbed his brother's declaration of war. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because our last conversation probably left you with a live-and-let-live impression from me. Whatever happens now, I don't want you running around claiming that I tricked you into dropping your guard. I don't want you to pretend that you didn't know I was coming for you. Not very Slytherin of me, I know, but my Gryffindor side insists that I beat you fairly as well as decisively."

Jim's face darkened. "Fair enough. Game on." Both brothers scowled at each other before returning to their respective groups.

At about that time, several faculty members entered the room. Lily Potter and Pomona Sprout entered first. Lily noticed her two sons as they separated with each bearing angry expressions. Jim acknowledged his mother with a nod, while Harry ignored her completely. Before she could speak to either boy, Gilderoy Lockhart strode into the room with a flourish wearing a stylish dueling outfit with a half-cape flung over his shoulder. On his left arm was a white satin gauntlet that doubled as a wand holster. Profs. Snape and Flitwick entered behind him.

"Good evening, students and faculty! And welcome to the first of what I hope will be many meetings for the *Hogwarts Dueling Association!*" Behind him, Snape's lip curled slightly. The DADA instructor continued his opening remarks for another five minutes, including a brief history of professional dueling, an introduction of the members of Team Counterstrike (all of whom he asked to come forward and stand next to the dueling platform as they were introduced), and an explanation of the rules of ping-pong punctuated by five bad jokes and three "ha-Has," each of which made Harry visibly wince.

"But, I'm sure that it's been the talk of the school that I've spent months teaching these fine young students to play a Muggle leisure activity. Tonight, you will all find out why. Raise your hands, students, if you have ever heard of ... the Averno Shield." Not a single student raised a hand.

"Unsurprising, for it is a very rare Charm, and only the most dexterous of wizards and witches can use it with any effectiveness."

With that, Lockhart waved his wand, and the word "*Avertō*" appeared in the air in flaming letters. Then, he whirled around to face Team Counterstrike. "Cedric Diggory. Kindly step forward and demonstrate the Protego Shield for everyone." Cedric did as instructed, and there was a flash of gold around him which quickly faded into the soft, barely visible heat-haze that astute observers recognized as the Protego.

"Well done as always, Mr. Diggory. Now, using the *exact same wand movements*, cast the spell again only saying *Avertō* instead of *Protego*. The accent is on the second syllable which is pronounced to rhyme with 'air' with a slight trill on the 'r.'"

Cedric studied the word for a few seconds, muttering it under his breath to make sure his pronunciation was correct. Then, he cast the spell as instructed. However, there was no apparent effect. Confused, Cedric started to try again when Lockhart interrupted him.

"Please examine the tip of your wand, Mr. Diggory. The results might surprise you."

Cedric pulled his wand up even with his eyes, and he was indeed surprised. There was a tiny, barely visible bubble, no more than three or so inches across, centered on the tip of his wand. Confused, Cedric felt out for his magic and was further surprised to realize that it was fueling this tiny shield, but at a level so small that he barely felt a drain at all. Then, he touched it lightly with his fingertip before jerking it back with a soft "Ouch!"

"What you see there, Mr. Diggory, is the Avertō Shield, a shield spell that is every bit as strong as a Protego but which has only a tiny fraction of Protego's size and power

demand. With practice, you can maintain that shield for *hours* without draining yourself. Now, you may ask '*But Professor Lockhart, what good is a shield that's only three inches across?*' Allow me to demonstrate. *Mr. Harry Potter.* Would you be so kind as to target me with a Stinging Hex?"

Harry crooked an eyebrow. Then, as fast as he could, Harry flicked out his wand and cast. "**ACULEUS!**" The Stinging Hex flew towards Lockhart, who casually batted it away to impact harmlessly into a wall. Harry and the rest of the students were suitably impressed.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. But while the defensive benefits of Avertio are obvious, there is more. If you are quick enough, dexterous enough, and knowledgeable enough about offensive and defensive magic, you can *combine* the stroke that parries an incoming attack with one of the wand strokes of an attack spell, hence my naming this group *Team Counterstrike*. Mr. Potter, target me again with a Stinging Hex, please."

Harry nodded and fired off another hex even faster than before. This time, Lockhart lunged slightly and cried out "**EXPELLIARMUS,**" timing his wand movements so that the second slash of the spell also deflected Harry's hex. Lockhart's spell then hit Harry before he could react, and Harry's wand flew across the room where the DADA professor caught it easily. The whole thing happened with astonishing speed.

"The defense is not perfect," said Lockhart to the group as he walked over to return Harry's wand. "Far from it, in fact, if you lack the skill to use it flawlessly. Fail to parry the incoming spell, and you will bear the full brunt of it. Also, it cannot block spells which target an entire area, such as Bombarda, nor spells which cannot normally be blocked by



a Protego. And it goes without saying that it cannot block any of the Unforgivables. Still, within the structured environment of a duel, it is a formidable defense, but only if you're clever enough to combine it with appropriate attack spells."

With that, he nodded to Professor Flitwick who used the Pyrologos Charm to cover one of the side walls in flaming words, about thirty or so in all. Harry realized that they were all offensive Charms, Third Year and below, most of which he already knew. Notably, all of the cutting spells, explosive spells, and burning spells that he'd studied were conspicuously absent. However, one spell on the list made Harry smile.

"These spells," said Flitwick in his squeaky voice, "are the only offensive spells permitted for competitive dueling at the Beginner Level under the rules set forth by the Western European Dueling Association. Members of Team Counterstrike, take a few moments to review the list with an eye towards how to incorporate the wand patterns into an Avertio parry. Everyone else – Refreshment Time!" The students *not* on Team Counterstrike swarmed the refreshments tables while the team members, all of whom had developed strong competitive streaks over the last several weeks, pored over the list of allowed spells.

Fifteen minutes later, Lockhart summoned everyone back to the dueling platform. "Now then, as you've no doubt realized, the purpose of nearly four months of ping-pong practice is to see whether the game serves as a viable practice tool for developing skill at parrying incoming spells. So let's start off with Mr. Diggory and Mr. Finch-Fletchley. Diggory is a Fourth Year and has been first in his class in DADA for the last two years running, but his duties as prefect and Quidditch captain have cut into his ping-

pong practice time. Finch-Fletchley is a Second Year with respectable but not dominating DADA scores, *but* he is an accomplished ping-pong player who has taught most of Team Counterstrike literally everything they know about the game, *ha-Ha!* So let us see who has the advantage."

Somewhat nervously, Justin headed to one end of the platform while Cedric went to the other. Flitwick explained the dueling protocol, and then the two boys met in the middle of the platform, raised their wands in salute, and then bowed before heading back to the opposite ends where each of them activated their Averno parrying shields. The diminutive professor said that the two would be playing a "best of five" match, which meant that a duelist would receive a point for each time he successfully disarmed the other, and the first duelist to get three points would win. Then, Flitwick tapped the platform three times with his own wand and cried out "**CERTAMEN!**" and a glimmering shield wrapped itself around the perimeter of the platform before fading into transparency. Designed specifically for competition dueling, the Certamen shield would prevent any missed or deflected spells from hitting anyone in the audience. Flitwick raised his wand high and then slashed down quickly to signify that the duel had begun.

Immediately, Diggory fired off a volley of charms and hexes towards the younger Hufflepuff. Justin was able to parry them fairly easily, but troubles came when he tried to return fire, as he simply wasn't fast enough to get a spell off before Cedric sent one his way. Despite his superior skill at ping-pong, Justin was soon down 2-0, one point away from losing the duel. Then, he heard a voice behind him say "Call for a time out." It was Draco. Somewhat surprised, Justin gave the signal for a sixty-second time out to Flitwick before turning towards Draco who was at the end of the platform.

"You can parry Diggory all day if you need to," he said sagely. "Your problem is that you abandon your defense in favor of an attack before you have a good opening. Be patient and play to your strengths." Justin's forehead creased as he considered Draco's words. Meanwhile, Malfoy's two bodyguards stood behind him looking at each other nervously, completely baffled by the sight of their "boss" helping out a Mudblood. Then, Flitwick called time-in, and the duel resumed.

Justin took his sort-of-friend's advice to heart and focused solely on parrying everything Cedric threw at him. By the tenth parried spell, Cedric was becoming annoyed. By the twentieth, he was visibly frustrated and a little bit tired. It was on the twenty-third spell that Cedric got a little sloppy and finally gave Justin an opening. He parried Cedric's spell and led that directly into a Tarantallegra. Caught off guard, Cedric tried to parry but missed. Then, he spent several precious seconds trying to cast the counter-curse while dancing furiously and was completely unprepared when Justin's Expelliarmus slammed into him. The score was 2-1. The next round went just as badly for Diggory, and Justin took him down the same way. Tied at 2-2.

Then, it was Cedric's turn to call for a time-out, which he spent calming himself down and trying to think critically about how to get around Justin's seemingly impenetrable defense. Just as Flitwick called time-in, an idea came to the older boy, and he smiled to himself. The final round began with Cedric firing off several rapid fire spells aimed first at Justin's stomach, then his chest, and finally his head. Justin parried each progressively higher spell in turn, but as he reached up to deflect the last spell, Cedric suddenly dropped to one knee and fired off a Leg-Locker Curse towards Justin's shins, no more than a foot above the floor. For one critical second, Justin was paralyzed trying to

decide between parrying or simply trying to dodge the spell. That was one second too long, as the curse hit him before he could move, and he fell over on his side. Cedric quickly disarmed him and claimed victory to the general applause of the student body. He came over to return Justin's wand and help him up, and he congratulated Justin on a hard-fought match.

"Well done to both of you!" exclaimed Lockhart. "In this instance, it's safe to say that greater experience narrowly trumped the use of that particular defense. While Mr. Finch-Fletchley's skill with Averno is most impressive, you don't have to parry *every* attack. Mr. Diggory's Leg-Locker Curse was low enough to the ground that Mr. Finch-Fletchley *could* have simply hopped over it, in which case, he might have gained a tactical advantage over Mr. Diggory who was down on one knee limiting his mobility. Still, definitely well done to you both. Now, let's see what happens with two students who are very comparable in skill, both in ping-pong and in spellwork. Mr. Harry Potter and Mr. Jim Potter, please take to the dueling platform!"

Harry strode confidently to the end of the platform where the two Hufflepuffs were exiting, stopping to congratulate Diggory for his win and Justin for his strong effort. Then, he walked up the steps and down the platform to meet Jim in the center. In the back of the room, Lily Potter tensed, visibly unhappy that Lockhart had set her two sons against one another.

"You sure you want this, Harry? Total war?" asked Jim in a calm voice.

"I don't think either of us ever had much choice, Jim," Harry replied.

"Alright then. Prepare to have your happiness ruined again."

Harry snorted at that, and the two boys raised their wands to salute one another before returning to their respective ends to activate their shields. Then, Flitwick raised his wand and slashed down, and the duel began. As Lockhart had suggested, Harry and Jim were very close in both physical and magical skill. For two solid minutes, spells flew back and forth, as the Potter Twins attacked and parried and attacked again, apparently too evenly matched for either to disarm the other. Unfortunately, Harry gradually came to realize that *very close* in skill did not mean equal. To his unexpected surprise, Harry was forced to acknowledge that for all his effort and study, Jim really was just a tiny bit faster and more experienced than him. Just past the two minute mark, Jim finally disarmed his older brother.

"One point to Jim Potter!" exclaimed Flitwick. "Score: one to zero." The Gryffindors cheered loudly, led by Ron who stood nearest to Jim at the end of the platform, ever ready to give encouragement. The Slytherins booed, though some of them cast disparaging looks at Harry for his failure, and Harry suddenly realized that he might have miscalculated. He'd hoped to get inside Jim's head and make him arrogant and overconfident. It had not occurred to Harry that Jim's arrogance and confidence at dueling would be justified by his actual skill. To his embarrassment, Harry realized that for the very first time since he came to Hogwarts, one of his power plays was in danger of blowing up in his face.

The second round preceded much like the first except that both boys were even more intense. The two were evenly matched for almost three minutes this time, a remarkable duration for first time duelists – typical Beginner

competition rounds rarely lasted for more than five minutes, and a couple of novices normally wouldn't last more than one. Unable to get any spells past Jim, Harry finally stole a play from Cedric Diggory, ducking under an attack and aiming a Stunner at Jim's lower legs. But the Gryffindor was ready even for that. He leaped *over* the incoming spell, and as he fell towards the floor, he let loose with another Disarming Jinx, also aimed at his opponent's legs. Harry tried to dodge, but he mistimed it slightly, and the Expelliarmus barely grazed his leg. That, unfortunately, was enough to disarm Harry a second time.

"One point to Jim Potter!" exclaimed Flitwick again. "Score: two to zero."

"Time out!" Harry whirled around in surprise. It was Professor Snape who called for a time-out, and Harry's Head of House was now giving him a stern look. Meanwhile, Jim got up and returned to his end of the platform to the cheers of his Housemates. By now, the Slytherins in attendance were noticeably subdued.

"As impressive as your skills are, Mr. Potter, they seem ... inadequate to overcome those of the Other Potter. Explain yourself."

"Jim's been getting lessons over the Summer, apparently with a heavy emphasis on combat training," Harry said in a tight voice. He had not yet suppressed his emotions with Occlumency as doing so would also deprive him of the benefits of any adrenaline rush. It was a balancing act to know when to suppress emotions and when to rely upon them, one with which he was still grappling.

"It was my understanding that you were *also* taking lessons in defensive magic over the summer, Potter."

Harry's eyes flashed. "I took lessons so that I could take my OWLs early, sir," he said. "*Jim* took lessons so he could learn to fight Death Eaters."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Be that as it may, while your brother may be your superior, if only in this narrow area, he is still a Gryffindor and is thus congenitally incapable of lateral thinking. This far, while he has shown multiple defensive approaches, all of his attacks are simple and direct. He seems either incapable of or uninterested in any form of indirect or obfuscatory tactics. You are a Slytherin. Use spells which can harry or divert him but which don't actually require you to overcome his admittedly strong defense." Snape glanced up at the flaming spell list still floating next to the far wall. "Something from the Opuggno series, perhaps?"

With that bit of advice, Snape stepped back into the crowd while Harry turned to study the spell list once again. Then, as the time-out ended, he resumed his dueling pose. Flitwick gave the signal again, and Harry and Jim both opened fire on each other. The spells flew even faster than the first two rounds, but around the one minute mark, Harry thought he saw his opening.

"***SERPENTSORTIA OPUGGNO!***" he yelled. Only Serpensortia was needed to summon a snake of Harry's choice - a boa constrictor, in this case - but using it as part of the Opuggno Jinx ensured that the snake would aggressively attack Jim without any further instructions from Harry, and certainly without the need for any Parseltongue instructions that Harry had no intention of giving in front of half the school. Unfortunately, "*Serpensortia Opuggno*" is a mouthful and requires a fairly complicated wand pattern, both of which gave Jim what he thought might be the opening for a finishing move.

"**EXPELLIARMUS!**" Jim's Disarming Jinx flew towards Harry only to impact with the conjured boa constrictor just as it was coming into solidity.

And then came the deafening *BOOM*.

The two spells crossed, and where they impacted with one another there was suddenly a seething ball of blinding white light. The ball expanded quickly, first rubbing up against the Certaman shield at the edges of the dueling platform and then *shattering it* with great force, knocking down most of the people around the platform in the process. Those further away and nearest the door rather sensibly made a break for it. Lily Potter did not, and instead, she tried to push her way through the crowd towards her sons.

Simultaneously, the glowing sphere shot out two tendrils of energy, one towards each of the Potter Twins. Harry couldn't see what was happening with Jim, but when the tendril nearest him touched the tip of his wand, his hand snapped tight into a death grip, and he felt as though he were being electrocuted. Instinctively, he fought back, pushing his magic through the connection between his wand and the sphere. For just a second, the sphere moved away from Harry and towards Jim. Then, it stopped suddenly before jerking back a few feet towards Harry, who could somehow feel his brother pushing the ball towards him.

"*Oh no you don't,*" Harry thought angrily before he pushed more of himself into the sphere, which wavered between the two boys before remaining in place. Then, it started to slowly expand and grow brighter as both twins pushed against it. And from inside the glowing sphere came the sound of angry hissing that grew louder and *deeper* as the sphere expanded.



"What the *Hell* is *THAT?!'*" exclaimed Lockhart in a mixture of anger and fear. Then, Professor Flitwick, who was nearby, answered his question with an exclamation of his own.

"Bless my soul!" he yelled in wonder. "It's ... of course! I should have anticipated this what with two identical twins! It's *the Brother Wand Effect!*"

"*The what?!'*" asked Lockhart who was slowly backing away from the expanding sphere with his wand pointed at it. Inside, he could just barely make out some writhing shape thrashing about, apparently in pain from the sounds it was making.

"Never mind for now, Gilderoy! Severus! We must disarm the Potter Twins but we *must* do so simultaneously, else the one who is disarmed first might be injured or killed!" On the other side of the table, Snape nodded and then pointed his wand at Harry Potter. Flitwick did the same towards Jim, and on the count of three, they each fired off Disarming Charms at the two boys. Jim's wand went flying off behind him, while Harry's flew off towards the panicking crowd. Theo Nott actually pushed two people aside before jumping up to catch it.

Instantly, the white sphere *exploded* with enough force to knock most of the observers flat on their backs, including both Harry and Jim, as well as most of the faculty present. And in the center of the platform where the glowing sphere had been was ... not a snake so much as an *abomination*. Over thirty feet long and three-feet in diameter at the widest point, the snake was covered with shiny emerald green scales which appeared to be made of metal. But the most striking feature of the snake was its eyes – they *burned*, literally burned with an unholy green fire. Twisting around, the snake focused its attention on the

largest mass of students, opened its wide maw, and breathed a gout of green flame directly towards them. Snape was faster, and he successfully cast a Mass Protego to protect the students, but then he screamed in pain, as he was somehow able to feel the heat of the flames *though* his shield. The magical feedback caused the Potions Master to swoon, and Marcus and some of the other Slytherins caught him and dragged him away from the snake. The other professors on hand tried their best to usher students out of the Great Hall, but too many were on the far side of the platform. Flitwick, Lockhart, and several older students cast what spells they could, but the snake seemed to have magic resistant scales. Suddenly, the creature let out a *roar*, and Harry was surprised to realize he could understand it despite the snake's strange nature.

*"PAIN! WHY DOESSSS IT HURT SSSSO MUCH!"*

Then, one of the older Gryffindors standing near fired off a Cutting Hex at the creature which had no effect except to draw its attention and make it angrier. Amid cries of terror, the Gryffindors tried to get around the platform to flee, while Jim Potter finally pulled himself up off the floor into a kneeling position. The snake hissed in anger and then unleashed a gout of flame that struck the floor near the fleeing students, generating a small explosion and knocking most of the Gryffindors to the ground. A second later, another gout of flame targeted the helpless students, but at the last second, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Draco Malfoy (*of all people!*) interposed themselves and cast overlapping Protego spells. Both boys screamed in pain as the unearthly green flames struck, but the shields held and none of the students were burned. Even angrier now, the serpent cast about for some other target and saw one: Jim Potter.

From the opposite side of the platform, Harry marveled at the absurdity of the choice he faced. If he did nothing, the snake would likely kill his brother, ending their rivalry and clearing Harry's way to the Potter Seat no matter what James Potter and Peter Pettigrew had to say about it. *Or* he could save his brother but at the cost of revealing himself as a Parselmouth in front of most of the school and confirming in the minds of most of Wizarding Britain that he was a future dark wizard. Harry muttered an expletive that would scandalize Hermione if she'd been on hand to hear it. Then, he drew a deep breath.

*"SSSSSTOP!"*

The snake froze and focused its attention on the source of the command. *"YOU ARE A SSSSPEAKER OF THE SSSACRED TONGUE?"*

*"YESSSS. I AM A SSSPEAKER OF THE FOUNDER'S SSSSACRED TONGUE. AND I COMMAND YOU IN THE NAME OF SSSALAZAR SSSLYTHERIN TO HARM NO ONE. DO YOU UNDERSSSSTAND?"*

*"YESSS, MASSSTER. BUT THE PAIN. IT HURTSSSS."*

*"I KNOW. I'M SSSSORRY. I WILL END YOUR PAIN AS SSSSOON AS POSSSSSIBLE."*

At that, the serpent calmed itself and awaited further instructions. With the immediate danger past, everyone in the room focused their attention on the one who had charmed the monstrous creature. The Muggleborns were confused by what had happened but knew enough to realize they should be frightened. Everyone else in the room, however, knew exactly what a Parselmouth was and what it might mean to exhibit that gift. Whether in horror

or wonder, everyone in the room was fixated on Potter and his giant, fire-breathing pet snake.

Everyone *including* his older brother Harry, for whom Christmas had just come early.

Quickly surveying the room, Harry called out to Theo Nott, and the other boy tossed Harry his wand. Then, summoning all his will and magic, Harry stepped forward and cast a spell at the giant snake with as much energy as he could. "**VIPERA EVANESCA!**" he cried, and with a hiss of pain and a final harmless gout of green flame, the giant snake disintegrated. Then, without even looking towards Jim, who seemed paralyzed by the crowd's reaction to him, Harry jumped off the platform and raced over to help Justin and Draco to their feet.

"Justin! Draco! Are you two okay?!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "I swear I have no idea what happened! It was supposed to just be a boa constrictor! I have no idea how it got turned into that ... *thing!*"

"I think we're both fine, Harry," said Draco.

"Yes," said Justin. "It hurt like the dickens when the fire touched our shields, but once the fire stopped so did the pain."

Quickly, Harry turned to the others students who had been knocked down – mostly younger Gryffindors. "Is everyone else okay?" he asked with as much genuine concern and compassion for the Gryffs as he could fake on short notice. By that time, Lockhart and the other professors were gathered around to confirm that everyone was alright. With as much discretion as possible, Harry studied the professors around him. Most of them were studiously avoiding looking towards Jim who was now making his own

way off the platform nervously. Lilly Potter *was* looking towards Jim with a concerned expression, but she made no move to approach him.

"Right," said Lockhart. "Now that we know we're all okay, Professor Flitwick, I believe you can shed some light on what just happened?"

"I believe so," said the Charms professor, "but first – Mr. Potter, what is your wand made of?"

Harry blinked at the odd segue. "Um, holly and phoenix feather."

"I thought as much. And Jim's wand, I happen to know, is ash and phoenix feather. And since there has only been one phoenix that has been sighted in Britain in the last century, I've no doubt it was the *same* phoenix." Flitwick said triumphantly as if that answered everyone's question.

Lockhart coughed. "I ... see. And that has something to do with the ... Brother Thingy?"

"The Brother Wand Effect. An incredibly rare phenomenon. If you have two wands that have a strong sympathetic connection, each wielded by duelists who *also* have strong sympathetic connections, and the two wands cross against one another just right, it can create a sort of magical embolism that allows raw Wild Magic to manifest, warping the spells used in unpredictable ways."

At the mention of Wild Magic, Snape coughed very loudly. "As interesting as that is, Professor Flitwick, the students have just endured a terrifying experience. Perhaps it would be best if we end tonight's session early and put off the Dueling Club's organizational meeting to another date."

"I agree, Professor Snape," said Lockhart. Flitwick started to say something but then thought better of it in light of the oddly stern looks that both Snape and Lockhart were giving him. "Everyone, thank you all for coming," Lockhart continued. "I'll be posting a notice sometime soon about when the Dueling Club will meet again. For now, please clear the hall."

With that, the students, most of whom had been standing around muttering in confusion, turned towards the exit, when Ron Weasley suddenly spoke up loudly enough for the whole room to hear.

"Harry, are you a Parselmouth too?" he said in a shaken yet oddly outraged voice.

At that, everyone in the room stopped and looked towards Harry. Jim by this point was about ten feet away when he froze, the blood draining from his face.

Harry looked around mildly at the sudden attention before turning back to Ron with a puzzled expression. "Parsa-what?" he asked in obvious confusion. Behind Ron, Draco's eyes bulged slightly before he caught himself and put on an emotionless mask.

"*Parselmouth*. It means you can talk to snakes," Ron said. Except that he wasn't looking at Harry, but at Jim. "*You-Know-Who* was a Parselmouth,"

"Oh, you mean that ... *hissy* thing Jim was doing," said Harry evenly. "Now that you mention it, I think my father said something to me about it at one point. But no, I've never had chance to actually learn the spell."

"It's not a *spell*," Ron spat. "Usually, it's inherited. But if Jim's *twin* doesn't have it..."

"YES, YES!" said Lockhart very loudly. "That's all quite interesting, but it's late, late, late! Why it'll be past curfew in just..." He checked his pocket watch. "An hour and a half," he finished lamely.

"Ron?" said Jim. His voice cracked just a little bit.

"You got it from *him*, didn't you?!" Ron practically snarled. "You've got *a part of him inside you!*"

With that, there was now a noticeable muttering from the surrounding students, all of whom were now blatantly ignoring the professors' directions to leave.

"Ron, don't ... please don't do this." Jim took a step towards his best friend, who quickly took two steps back with an expression of disgust and anger on his face.

"Honestly, Ron," said Harry in a reassuring voice. "You're being ridiculous. I'm sure there's a perfectly rational explanation for why my brother has this ... evil snake-talking power. I mean, you make it sound like You-Know-Who *marked* Jim in ... some ... way." Harry's voice trailed off as he suddenly began to stare intently at the V-shaped scar on Jim's right temple. Soon, he wasn't the only one.

Jim grew even paler as he looked around the room and took in all the faces that now stared back at him with fear and loathing. He took another step towards Ron.

"DON'T YOU TOUCH ME!" yelled the upset boy.

"Ron, just let me explain!"

"Boys, that is *enough!*" said Lockhart, who was trying unsuccessfully to assert some control over the situation.

"No, I understand now!" Ron yelled while ignoring the professors completely. "I get it! Why you'd spend all your time with a nobody like me! All this time, I thought you wanted a friend to help you fight *Voldemort*!" There was a visible gasp as Ron said the taboo name. "But you never wanted a *friend*, did you?! You wanted a *MINION*! How long would it have been before you made me get A *SNAKE TATTOO*!"

At that, Jim's fear over his exposure gave way to anger, and he took a step towards his erstwhile friend as if to strike Ron. "You bastard!" At that, the Weasley Twins and their brother Percy *all* stepped in front Ron protectively.

"And there it is," said Ron to the rest of the room. "You see? He hears something he doesn't like and gets violent. Good thing he doesn't know the Cruciatus yet, isn't it!"

At that, Jim looked like he'd been gut-punched. Then, everyone jumped when Snape fired off loud fireworks from his wand. "EVERYONE! DORMITORIES! *NOW*!" Immediately, everyone moved quickly towards the exit, with the older Weasleys huddled around Ron protectively. Lily Potter intercepted Jim and began talking with him. Harry and Theo were among the last to reach the doors to the Great Hall, and both of them spared a quick glance back. By now, Jim had actually begun to cry, and his (*their*) mother pulled him into an embrace, even as her own expression became fearful. Theo saw it too.

"So," he said quietly. "How long until you let Jim off the hook?"

Harry didn't answer. Instead, he put his arm around Theo's shoulders with a firm grip. "Walk with me, Theo," he said in an eerily calm voice. Harry led Theo out of the Great Hall,



across the corridor, and into the foyer until they were standing with their backs to the closed portcullis. Then, he gestured around the area.

"Where are we, Theo?" Harry asked with an amiable smile.

"Um, the main foyer?" replied Theo who suddenly felt oddly nervous.

"Yeaaaaah, the main foyer. Now, Theo, picture it if you will. Me, Draco, Marcus, and the rest of the Slytherin Quidditch team. All standing in this foyer, right where we are now. Half-frozen, soaking wet, muddy ... and *practically bollocks-naked*. With Jim Potter and his lapdogs laughing at us, and the head photographer for his *fan club* taking pictures."

Harry turned back to Theo and grinned in a way that made the other boy shudder. "No, Theo. I'm not letting Jim Potter off the hook. Jim Potter, Hogwarts' most famous Parselmouth, is going to dangle on the hook for my amusement. I'm going to leave Jim Potter, future dark wizard, on the hook and let him twist slowly in the wind."

With that, Harry patted his friend on the back and then headed towards the dungeons with a spring in his step. Behind him, Theo exhaled and reminded himself why it was good to be Harry's friend ... and very, very bad to be his enemy.

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### ***People were talking ...***

"*James, something ... something's happened*," said Lily Potter through the fireplace's flames. "*With Jim*."

"*Headmaster*," said Severus Snape impassively. "*There has been an important development that you should be aware*

*of."*

*"No, Mr. Weasley, we will not reassign Jim Potter to a private room no matter how frightened your brother is of him!"* said Minerva McGonagall in a brittle voice that made her anxious Sixth Year prefect wince.

*"Well now, that was unexpected,"* said Peter Pettigrew almost gleefully to himself just seconds after James broke the Floo connection.

*"Mamma, I have some concerns about our long-term goals,"* wrote Blaise Zabini in a letter to the Countess Zabini, except that his words were both in Italian and coded.

*"I know he's a Gryffindor,"* said Cassius Warrington to a small group of like-minded Slytherins. *"Maybe the Hat made a mistake. But none of that matters now. All that matters is ... getting Jim Potter to realize who his friends are."*

*"I was going to start off by telling you about Draco Malfoy's odd and sudden affection for a filthy Mudblood, but something else happened that was even more unexpected and important than that,"* wrote Drusilla Crabbe in a letter to her father.

*"No, we're staying down here. I'd rather sleep on the Common Room floor than in a room with ... him,"* said Ron Weasley to the Head Girl, as Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas nodded their heads in frightened agreement.

*"How the HELL does he expect me to spin THIS?!"* shouted Rita Skeeter angrily in response to a late night owl post.

*"I picked the wrong son,"* muttered James Potter to himself in amazement and horror as he stared out his study window

with a half-empty whiskey bottle in his hand.

*"Are you going to be okay, Jim?"* said Neville Longbottom, the only other boy still sleeping in the same room with the Boy-Who-Talked-To-Snakes.

Jim said nothing. He just rolled over and stared at the empty bed belonging to the best friend he'd ever had. Sleep was a long time coming.

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: "Curious," said Ollivander about Harry's wand back in Chapter 3. A pity that Harry was so angry with James that he didn't let the man finish. If he had, he might have learned about the two other wands that Ollivander had sold containing feathers from the same phoenix. But then, Harry has already acknowledged that an impatience with followup questions is a big failing of his.

# Aftershocks

## Chapter Notes

CLARIFICATION: Apparently, I was a little too clever for my own good with the wordsmithing of the last chapter, and some readers were left confused. Sorry. To clarify, Harry did not use Parseltongue at the Dueling Club. He was about to use Parseltongue to stop the snake, but Jim (rather heroically) acted just a second before Harry could. At that point, Harry seized the opportunity to publicly deny being able to talk to snakes and to insinuate that Jim only could because Voldemort marked him and made him prone to becoming a dark wizard. Got it? Good. Carry on.

## CHAPTER 31: Aftershocks

### 1 August 1986 (The Day After Jim Potter's Sixth Birthday)

#### The grounds of Potter Manor

*The toy broom wasn't very fast and couldn't fly very high, but it was still Jim's favorite present. His favorite real present from his mum and dad, that is, not one of the other presents sent by people he didn't even know and which his parents had made him give away to needy children. Which was fine with Jim because he had more presents than he could ever use, and his mum and dad said charity was a good thing and that the Boy-Who-Lived was supposed to do good things. But Jim was sure he'd have thrown a tantrum if they'd tried to give away his toy broom no matter how many needy wizarding children wanted one. He'd cried for hours when he'd broken the one he'd had since he was four and only been consoled when his dad had*

*promised to buy him the newest model of the Nimbus Jr. for his birthday.*

*The Boy-Who-Lived's Birthday Party Gala held the previous day had been long and tiring, and even though some of the guests his mum and dad had invited had brought children, Jim hadn't gotten a chance to play with any of them. Of course, that was to be expected – Jim had never had a chance to play with any children and at this point in his life, he wasn't fully aware that "playing with others" was a thing children did. And so, without knowing what he was missing from a lack of playmates, Jim was enjoying himself alone on his new toy broom ... right up until the little green snake reared up its head and hissed at him, an act which startled the boy so much he fell off and landed right next to the serpent. Jim had never seen a live snake before, but his mum and dad had both shown him pictures and warned him that snakes could be dangerous and were associated with the Bad House at Hogwarts – the Slither-Ins – and also with the Bad Man who Jim had defeated when he was just a baby.*

*"Don't hurt me!" the frightened boy cried out.*

*"Why would I hurt you?" replied the snake in a bemused feminine voice. "You're not a mouse. Why, you're not even a toad! And besides, I would never harm a Speaker!"*

*Jim blinked in confusion. His father had told him many things about snakes, but he'd never mentioned their conversational skills. "Hey! You can talk!"*

*"Of course, Speaker," she replied. "You're Speaking to me, and so I must respond. That is what it means to be a Speaker ... Speaker."*

*"Why are you calling me Speaker? My name's Jim, not Speaker. And what's your name?"*

*"What an interesting question! No one has ever asked me my name before. It's ... Evelyn. Yes, that's it. My name is Evelyn. Though you can call me Evie if you wish. And I call you Speaker because that's what you are: A Speaker of the Founder's sacred tongue."*

*Suddenly, another voice called out. "Jim? What are you doing?" It was the boy's mum, who was now standing about fifteen feet away and was watching the boy and his snake with a nervous expression.*

*"Hey mum! Come and see!" The innocent boy said excitedly. "I can talk to snakes!"*

*Lily Potter stood perfectly still for several seconds as she absorbed what her son had said. "Really?" she said in a tight voice. "Why don't you show me?" And with a smile, the boy did so. He turned back to Evelyn and directed an unearthly hiss towards the little grass snake that sent a chill down the witch's back.*

*After a few seconds, the boy turned back to his mum with a happy smile. "Her name is Evie, and she says she's a grass snake. Natrix natrix ... whatever that means. She says I'm a Speaker of Sal... Salzzzar Slither-In's sacred tongue. Can we keep her?"*

*"Jim ... come over here, please." Jim frowned at her mother's expression, which was one he'd never seen on her before. Dutifully, the boy got up and walked over to his mother who knelt beside him and brushed the dirt off of his clothes. "Jim... we need to talk about this. There's some things you need to understand about ... about talking to snakes ... and Salazar Slytherin ... and ... your father. Right*

*now, though, I want you to go back to the house. It's almost time for lunch."*

*"But what about Evie, mum?"*

*"Jim!" Lily said more forcefully. Then, her face softened. "You go on. I'll take care of Evie." Jim hesitated. "And then, we'll have treacle tart!" At that, the boy's face lit up with a smile. Lily kissed Jim's forehead and then sent him on back towards the manor house. Once he was out of sight, she walked over to pick up the boy's toy broom. Then, she looked down at the grass snake which seemed to be waiting patiently. For a long moment, she stared at it angrily, as if it were the snake's fault that her son was a Parselmouth with all that entailed. Then, with a sudden flick of her wand, the snake was sliced neatly in two. Lily vanished the remains and then turned back towards the house.*

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## ***18 December 1992***

### ***An hour before dawn***

Jim stared up at the darkened ceiling of the Gryffindor dorm. He'd barely slept a wink since the previous night's disaster. He'd made a promise at the age of six to never reveal that he was a Parselmouth, and while he certainly didn't regret using that hated and nearly-forgotten power to save the lives of his classmates, it was heartrending to see that everything his mother had warned him about was true – nearly everyone seemed to hate and fear him now because of Parseltongue's terrible reputation. Worst of all, not only was he exposed as a Parselmouth in front of his peers, but it was under circumstances which seemed to prove that Harry *wasn't* a Parselmouth. And *that* meant that Ron was probably right. Jim's ability to speak to snakes was something he'd acquired from Voldemort. A part of the

Dark Lord was inside him and had been all along. Was that why he'd been drawn to Mr. Nemo's Occlumency book? Was that why he'd been such an immature prat for so long? Was that what possessed him to call Hermione Granger a "*Mudblood*" the year before? Jim looked over sadly at Ron's empty bed once more, and then he pulled himself up and started getting dressed for his morning workout.

"Jim?" said Neville sleepily. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Sorry to wake you, Neville. I'm just going for a run."

Neville tried to process that for several seconds. "Jim, there's four feet of snow on the ground outside."

"I know. So, I'll just run up and down the stairs for an hour or so instead."

"Oh," said the other boy. He watched in silence as Jim pulled on some Muggle sweat pants that he used for his morning workouts. "You know, it *will* get better, Jim. Ron will come around. So will everyone else,"

"Ron and everyone else thinks I'm You-Know-Who Reborn, Neville." Jim paused. "Come to think of it, why do you *not* think that?"

Neville shrugged. "Because I know you. It's idiotic to think that you might be a dark wizard, especially after you tried to beat up You-Know-Who last year with karate."

"Taekwando."

"Ah," said Neville, who was not conversant with Muggle martial arts techniques. "And anyway, it's ... extra idiotic to think you're a dark wizard just for being a Parselmouth."



Jim gave a sad smile. "You're being pretty broad-minded about it. Especially since last September, you were ready to jump me in the Common Room for that prank I played on Harry with the boggart."

"Gryffindors are supposed to do what's right instead of what's easy. Back then, it was right to stand up to you when you were being a prat to your brother. Now, it's right to stand by you when everyone else is being a prat to you." Then, Neville smirked a bit. "Mind you, there is a certain ... poetry to this. I mean, you *have* been suggesting that Harry was a future dark wizard since his Sorting and with a lot less actual evidence than being a Parseltongue."

Jim sighed. "Believe me, Neville," he said ruefully. "I am *well aware* of the fact that I seem to be paying off all my accumulated bad karma at once."

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## **Professor Lockhart's Office**

### **8:45 a.m.**

"Come in," said the DADA instructor in response to the soft knock. The door opened, and an oddly timid George Weasley entered.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Have a seat," said Lockhart without smiling. George moved to the chair in front of the desk. As he did, he glanced at a nearby chalkboard upon which was written a rune chain that he thought seemed oddly familiar. Lockhart noticed his expression.

"What do you think of it, Mr. Weasley?" he said in a cool voice.

George studied the runes more intently for a few seconds before speaking. "It's some kind of portkey matrix, but it's not like the usual kind. It looks like it was designed for something a lot bigger than the normal portkey. And if I had to guess, I'd say it was it was designed for a portkey to be triggered by some environmental condition." He cocked his head at one section. "Is that ... *steam*?!"

"Indeed. This matrix was for an oversized portkey designed to activate automatically when exposed to any significant amount of steam. And I direct your attention to the rune sequence on the third row, the one with that odd combination of Younger and Elder Futhark. Does that look familiar to you?"

George nodded silently. The sequence, as a matter of fact, looked like something out of the project he'd been working on desperately to catch up after his original notes had been stolen following the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match. Suddenly, he began to have an uneasy feeling about why he was here ... and why one of his favorite teachers was now so cold towards him.

"In point of fact, Mr. Weasley, you are the only member of Research Team Backdoor to sequence mixed runes in such an unconventional manner. Frankly, I'm surprised Professor Babbling didn't break you of such habits during your first year of Ancient Runes."

"I never had Professor Babbling, sir, or Ancient Runes."

"Well that makes ..." Lockhart stopped mid-sentence and stared at the boy. "I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?"

"I never took Ancient Runes. Me and Fred took Care of Magical Creatures and Divination. We thought they'd be easier grades."

Lockhart's left eye twitched. "Well, yes, *of course* you did. And could explain you to me how in Merlin's name you can now display a better grasp of interlocking runes than some of the NEWTs-level students *despite never having had the class?!"*

George shrugged. "Our brother Bill is a curse-breaker. We got hold of some of his old textbooks from when he was working on his Mastery and taught ourselves what we know about runeworking."

Lockhart's eye twitched again, even more violently. "How ... how did you even learn *Futhark?!"* he asked in amazement.

"We found the recipe for the language potions and brewed them the Summer after Second Year," the boy said as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

"Of course you did." The professor leaned back and closed his eyes wearily. "Of *course* you did."

"Sir, this is about that prank somebody played on the Slytherins last night, isn't it. You think I was involved, don't you?"

Lockhart opened his eyes and regarded his student intently. "I *think* the prank was performed by someone highly familiar with the experimental rune sequences we've been working with in Project Backdoor. I *think* it was specifically someone who has been working on large-scale portkeys which was *your* project area. And I *think* it was someone with an inventive mind for pranks who also has a grudge against the Slytherin Quidditch team. Who do *you* think my prime suspect should be?"

"It *wasn't me!*" said George excitedly. "Last month, during the Quidditch match, someone stole my notes out of the

locker room. Whoever it was might have been able to use them for the prank!"

"Really?" said Lockhart doubtfully. "Your notes just happened to be stolen by someone with the technical expertise to understand them *and* someone who would use your research against the Slytherins?"

"You can check with Oliver Wood. We told him the minute we found out that we'd been robbed. *And* we also asked Harry Potter to check into who might have done it *before* yesterday."

Lockhart rubbed his chin for a few seconds as he considered what George had said.

"Sir," the boy continued earnestly. "My first day on the team, I *promised* you that I wouldn't use what I learned for pranks. I meant it then and I mean it now. I had *nothing* to do with what happened to the Slytherins last night."

Lockhart hesitated before speaking. "I believe you. Merlin knows why, Weasley, but I believe you. Unfortunately, my personal beliefs are not enough to defeat my professional responsibilities. When the Slytherins made it through the doors last night, it was just as Mr. Filch was about to *bar them for the evening!* The Headmaster wanted the castle locked up so that children weren't tempted to go out to play in the snow. And if the Slytherins had been just a few minutes later, they'd have been locked outside practically naked in a blizzard and *no one* would have known where they were. They could easily have *died*. The Headmaster wants answers, and all I have to give him are my personal beliefs in your innocence ... and the uncontroverted *facts*."

George looked fearful. He remembered how angry Professor McGonagall had been after Jim's boggart prank

against Harry. And now someone had played an even more dangerous prank against Harry and several other Slytherins, a prank for which he was about to get the blame. In light of what had happened, outright expulsion was a possibility.

"I can give you until tomorrow morning, Mr. Weasley, to marshal what evidence you can in your defense before I go to the Headmaster. And I promise that if you are accused, I will speak up in your defense. But if I do, I want something in return."

The boy licked his lips. "What, sir?"

"I want you to sit for Professor Babbling's end-of-term examination before you leave for the Christmas holidays. And if you score high enough to satisfy her, I want you to join her Fourth Year Ancient Runes class when you return next term. You are a *wizard*, George Weasley. And you have an obligation to wizarding society and to *yourself* to be the best damned wizard you can be. And you'll never reach your true potential so long as you let people talk you into settling for easy grades."

George swallowed painfully. "*Expulsion?*" he thought. "*Or kill myself trying to catch up in Ancient Runes when I'm a year and a half behind? Which would be the worse nightmare to have come true?*"

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## **The Great Hall Lunch**

Harry Potter idly played with his food while trying to discreetly study his newly outcast brother. The other boy sat at the far end of the Gryffindor table instead of the middle where he normally held court. To Harry's mild

surprise, Neville was sitting with Jim, almost shielding him from notice by his house-mates. Harry felt the tiniest pang of jealousy at that, but then he suppressed it. Neville was universally considered to be the kindest boy in their year. *Of course*, he'd become protective of Jim once the rest of the school had turned on him. Harry also felt a slightly larger pang of guilt at how completely his brother had been rejected by the school for a talent that he himself also possessed and in large part because of his own manipulative actions. He suppressed that emotion even more ruthlessly. Then, for good measure, he suppressed the sudden spark of concern about using Occlumency to suppress emotions like guilt and empathy and what that might say about his own mental health.

Suddenly, Harry's attention was drawn to the sight of an owl approaching with a letter. He recognized it well enough. It was James Potter's personal owl, the same one that had delivered the Howler on his first day of class the previous year. "*Godric*" was the creature's name, if he remembered correctly. Harry smiled. If James had sent his favored son a Howler for being a Parselmouth, this might be the happiest day of his life. Unfortunately, the letter in the owl's clutches was not red, and the bird was actually headed in his direction. The owl landed and extended a claw towards Harry, one bearing a normal letter bearing his name along with the Potter family crest. Harry took the letter and then cut a small piece of ham to feed to the bird which hooted appreciatively before flying away. Harry elected not to immediately read the letter, which he pocketed instead. Glancing up and around, he was oddly pleased by the surprised and unhappy looks that both Jim and Lily Potter were giving him.

Meanwhile, further down the Gryffindor table, several of Jim's fellow Gryffindor's had struck up the beginnings of an

argument.

"So, Oliver, will you be holding tryouts for a new Seeker after the holidays?" asked Cormac McClaggen.

"And why the devil would I do something as stupid as that, McClaggen?" the Quidditch captain replied without looking up from the latest issue of **Quidditch Monthly**.

"Well, because of what happened last night!" said Parvati. "You know. With the snake and the evil hissing voice. Don't you care about that?"

"Nope. Honestly, I don't care *in the slightest* that Jim's a Parseltongue," said Oliver irritably.

"Parselmouth," said Luna Lovegood. "Language is important."

"Parselmouth, Parseltongue, Parselteeth or Parselgums, none of it matters to me. So long as Potter catches the Snitch, he can talk to snakes all day. Hell, he can teach them to sing and dance and spend his free time staging musical comedies for all I care."

"Really, Oliver?" said Seamus in disbelief. "You're actually okay with having a dark wizard on the team?"

"Oh, honestly," snapped Hermione. "The idea that Jim Potter is a *dark wizard* is preposterous, no matter who or what he talks with." She narrowed her eyes at Seamus. "Which reminds me – where's Ronald? I'd have expected him to be the one here peddling this nonsense."

"He's off with the Twins," said Lavender without looking up from her lunch. The girl had been very quiet ever since the

discussion had turned towards Jim's controversial gift.  
"George grabbed Fred and Ron before lunch started."

"Why didn't they get me?" asked Percy with his eyes narrowed. Lavender shrugged. "Well anyway, I don't know that Parseltongue necessarily makes Jim ... *dark*. But I've had my concerns with Ron hanging around him since their first year. Always dragging Ron into trouble ... and the way Jim just *assaulted* Harry back in November! He definitely has issues."

"Of course, he has issues," said Seamus. "It's like Ron said. He got his Parseltongue from You-Know-Who. I bet Jim Potter is actually the Heir of Slytherin."

"I find that highly improbable," said Hermione with a disdainful sniff.

"Oh come on, Hermione," replied Parvati. "You-Know-Who. Salazar Slytherin. Even Herpo the Foul. Everyone knows that Parseltongue is the sign of a dark wizard."

At that, there was a small crash from behind her, as Padma Patil slammed her cup down hard onto the Ravenclaw table before rising from her seat to angrily approach her twin sister.

"Oh, really, Parvati?" she said harshly. "*Everyone* knows Parseltongue is the sign of a dark wizard? Good to know! I can't *wait* to get home for the holidays and let mother know that her favorite uncle is a dark wizard just because he spent three years learning to talk to serpents!"

Several students gasped at that, while Parvati blanched.  
"Padma!" she exclaimed in embarrassment.



"You have an uncle who's a Parselmouth?" Lavender asked her friend in surprise. Parvati opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by her angry twin.

"Yes!" said Padma imperiously. "Our great-uncle, Gupta Baskar, spent *years* learning Parseltongue because certain kinds of magic are more potent if you speak the incantations in the language of serpents, most notably healing magic. Today, Uncle Gupta is the one of the most respected and successful Healers in all of Wizarding India."

"Hang on," said Hermione in surprise. "I didn't know you could *learn* Parseltongue."

"No offense, Hermione," said Padma, "but that's because you're a British witch attending a British magical school, and British wizards and witches don't acknowledge the existence of a universe beyond their shores. The truth is that Parseltongue is *thousands* of years old, far older than Salazar Slytherin. *His* innovation was not to create the language but to figure out how to invest it into his blood so that it would come naturally to his descendants instead of requiring years of study. But long before Hogwarts was built, Hypatia of Greece and Padraig of Ireland were Parselmouths, as was Paracelsus, one of the last great European wizard to become internationally famous among Muggles before the Statute of Secrecy was enacted. It is only because of its connections with Salazar Slytherin and with You-Know-Who that British wizards and witches think Parseltongue is evil."

Padma turned towards then end of the table. "Jim, I can see that this has been traumatic for you, but if you would like, I would be happy to write you a letter of introduction to Uncle Gupta. He can answer any questions you have about Parseltongue that are based on actual fact rather than," she

turned back towards her sister with a glare of contempt, "*primitive superstition*."

Jim, who was visibly surprised at how the Ravenclaw came to his aid, nodded gratefully. "Yes, please. I'd be very grateful. Thank you, Padma."

She nodded, and with one last dismissive look towards Parvati and the other Gryffindors, she returned to the Ravenclaw table. Meanwhile, Neville leaned over to Jim with a smile.

"See," said Neville. "Things aren't as bad as you thought."

Jim shrugged, but the Patil girl's words did seem to raise his spirits somewhat. "Maybe they're not." He glanced up towards the head table and saw that his mother was looking down towards him with a thoughtful expression. As was, to his surprise, Dumbledore, who actually smiled at him. Jim smiled back and then returned to his lunch in a slightly better mood.

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### ***Meanwhile in Gryffindor Tower***

Fred and Ron sat quietly by the fireplace. George had explained to them both what he'd learned from Lockhart – that whoever pranked the Slytherin Quidditch Team the night before had also done an excellent job of framing him. And worse, that he was at serious risk for expulsion over the matter. George and Fred had talked for a while and then argued for even longer before George complained of a headache and left to go lay down in his room. Ron and Fred stayed behind to continue talking.

"It's not fair. You and George had nothing to do with what happened to those slimy snakes. Why should he get

punished for it?"

"Fair's got nothing to do with it, little brother of mine. I reckon George is right. Whoever robbed our lockers of George's notes must have pulled off that prank on the snakes in such a way that it looks like George did it. But I don't know how to prove that."

The two sat quietly for a few minutes. Then, Ron looked up to his brother.

"Maybe there's another way."

"Another way to what?" replied Fred.

"Another way to keep George from getting expelled," replied Ron quietly. "I could take the fall for it instead."

"*What?!*" Fred exclaimed in shock.

"Everyone knows how much I hate Slytherins. I haven't been exactly subtle about it. I could go to McGonagall and say I copied George's notes and used them to prank their Quidditch team. Maybe she'd believe me."

"I don't much see how that improves things, Ronnikins. We'd still end up with a brother expelled. A net loss in my book."

"Better me than George. I mean, he's the one who's going to make something of himself, not me."

"Stop saying that, Ron!" said Fred angrily. "You're gonna make something of yourself. Something nobody will ever forget. And besides, well ... no offense, but you're not exactly the Prankmaster Weasley around here. Nobody

would ever believe that you could pull off something like that."

"Well, we've got to do *something*! Do you have any ideas?"

Fred shook his head no and then turned to stare at the fire. The two boys were quiet for a moment before Ron sighed and pulled out his notebook to prepare for his next class. Meanwhile, Fred thought about what his little brother had said. Slowly, an idea formed in his head, accompanied by a look of grim determination on his face. Ron sat quietly and took notes.

And waited.

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### ***The end of Potions Class*** ***3:00 p.m.***

As the students were turning in their vials and packing up at the end of Potions, Professor Snape called out to Harry.

"Sensible Potter. Remain after class. There is a House matter we need to discuss." Harry nodded and moved to the front of the room while everyone else departed. Snape gestured for him to sit at a desk and wait while he finished marking the potions that had been turned in. Finally, after a few minutes, Snape looked up at Harry and pulled out his wand, casting a spell before the boy could react.

"***SERPENSORTIA***." Instantly, Harry was shocked by the presence of a very angry and highly venomous coral snake materializing on the desk right in front of him.

"***SSStop!***" he hissed in a panic, and the angry snake stilled. Then, Harry glared up at Snape, who was completely unrepentant.

"You were wise to conceal the fact that you too possess this gift, Potter, though you would do well to be on guard against the Snake-Summoning Charm from those who might wish to expose you."

"I hope, *sir*, that there won't be too many people who try to expose me by summoning *a coral snake into my lap!*"

"Milk snake, Potter. Completely harmless. '*Red touch yellow - Kills the fellow. Red touch black - Venom lack.*' I would recommend you pursue an interest in herpetology if you wish to exploit this gift to its utmost."

"Noted, sir," he said drily. As Harry spoke, he calmly popped his wand and then vanished the milk snake. "So, do you plan to inform anyone that I'm also a Parselmouth?"

"I have no particular interest in making life easier for the Other Potter, but I do have questions for my own edification. How long have you known that you've had this gift."

"Since last year, about a month before James brought my Hogwarts letter. There was a boa constrictor at the London Zoo. It struck up a conversation with me, and then I had a bout of accidental magic that allowed it to get loose. I didn't learn that it was called Parseltongue or that it was considered *evil* until the day I met James."

"And he has no idea of this?"

Harry gave the Potions Master a look suggesting the question was practically offensive. "Currently, only seven Slytherins know I'm a Parselmouth, two of whom have graduated and all of whom are magically bound not to reveal my secret. No one else has any idea. Well, besides *you*."

"Oh, I'm sure quite a few people have *ideas*, Potter, but they lack proof. Now then, if you and the Other Potter *both* speak this language, it is undoubtedly genetic. Have you any theories as to how you both might have inherited this gift?"

"I don't need a theory, Professor Snape. I know exactly how we got it." Harry told him about the blood test performed at Gingrotts ... and the family name it produced. And not all of Severus Snape's many years of Occlumency training could keep a look of astonishment from his face.

"Who else knows about your lineage?" he asked after recovering his composure.

"Artemus Podmore and Hestia Jones, both of whom are bound by solicitor's oath. Oh, and the goblins, of course, but I'm paying them a hefty price for confidentiality. My plan is for no one else to know about it until I'm of age or otherwise when I *absolutely* need it."

"And yet, you freely revealed it to me."

Harry shrugged. "If I've misjudged my ability to trust you after all this time, I deserve to have my secrets revealed. Besides, I imagine you expect me to reveal the truth when doing so would be most damaging to James Potter, and that would make it worthwhile for you to *keep* my secret. Am I right?"

Snape snorted. "At least for the time being, Potter. However, it is possible that the Headmaster will instruct me to find out whether you are a Parselmouth like your brother. If so, we will discuss the matter at that time to determine how I can protect your secrets without violating my other oaths. You may go now."

Harry nodded and headed for the door when Snape spoke again. "Oh, and Potter? I want to be there to see the look on James Potter's face when he learns about Lily's true lineage."

Harry grinned. "Time permitting, sir, I'll send you an engraved invitation."

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Outside in the hall, Harry was surprised to see that Neville was waiting for him.

"Got a second, Harry?" he said.

Harry nodded and followed his Gryffindor friend to an empty classroom where, to Harry's further surprise, Neville put up several privacy Charms before turning to face him with a somewhat abashed expression.

"Listen, Harry ... If you were a Parselmouth ... you'd tell me, right?" he asked nervously.

Harry chuckled and smiled at his friend. "Oh honestly, Neville," he replied in a reassuring voice. "Of course not."

"Okay that's ... wait, *what?*" The other boy seemed mildly offended.

"Neville, I trust you as much as anyone in the world. But *if* I were a Parselmouth, there would be absolutely no upside to telling a highly honorable, morally upstanding Gryffindor who is obviously upset at the way my brother is being treated for having the same gift."

Neville frowned. "Harry..."

"No, stop. Let me just stop you right there. Right now, people think Jim acquired Parseltongue from You-Know-Who, which is plausible, I suppose. If Jim had any sense, he'd be playing that up, claiming that *of course* that's where he got it. That he defeated Voldemort as a baby and acquired the power through some sort of magical 'right of conquest' thing. Weirder things have happened. And if he did, I'm sure Rita Skeeter would print an article to that effect, everyone would believe it, and his fanclub would all buy snake familiars so that he could translate for them and he'd be *even more* popular than before."

Harry held up a finger. "*But*, if I were a Parselmouth too, that would mean that he and I both inherited it, most likely through Lily Potter, which would mean that we're *all three* descended from Salazar Slytherin. Now you tell me – would it *really* improve things for Jim if it were proven that he and I were *both* the Heirs of Slytherin and as a result our father divorced Lily and kicked him and our mother out of the ancestral home."

"Oh come on, Harry. James is awful, but surely he wouldn't be *that* bad."

With a smirk, Harry reached into the pocket of his robe, and produced the letter he'd received earlier from James Potter which he now handed over to his friend. Neville unfolded the letter and read it, his eyes widening as he did.

"Wow," he finally said. "Just ... wow. This was the letter you got today?"

"Yep. James Potter found out last night about Jim being a Parselmouth, and not one day later, he invites me and any guests of my choice – including *Snape* – to spend the Christmas holidays at Potter Manor because, and I



quote, *'my Heir should not feel unwelcome in the House of Potter during the holiday season'* unquote." Harry chuckled softly in amusement. "And since I certainly won't invite Professor Snape, how do you think you and your Gran would feel about spending the Christmas hols as my guests? The injunction means I can't be alone with the Potters without a guardian, and if Lady Augusta won't come, I'll have to pay one of my solicitors to spend the holidays there. Merlin only knows how many hours they'd bill me for."

Neville did a double-take. "You actually want to go? To spend your Christmas holiday at Potter Manor because your estranged Slytherin-phobic father suddenly wants to get to know you better or some such rot?"

Harry shrugged. "Like Artie said last summer, Potter Manor is part of my birthright. Whatever my relationship with James Potter – and it's still a *deeply* mistrustful one – I am perfectly capable of being polite to him for the length of the Christmas holidays. Besides, I had planned to be at Potter Manor anyway for the New Year's Eve party. Networking opportunities and all that. Anyway, I suspect Jim would be thrilled if you were there given the way he's latched onto you as his only friend."

Neville grimaced at that. He'd been worried that Harry might feel a bit jealous. "I'll owl Gran and let you know what she says."

Harry thanked his friend, and with that, the two boys exited the classroom. It wasn't until Neville was nearly at Gryffindor Tower that he'd finally realized how skillfully Harry had evaded his direct question about whether he too was a Parselmouth.

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## **The Headmaster's Office**

### **4:30 p.m.**

Albus Dumbledore studied the young boy in front of him with evident surprise. "Mr. Weasley, do I understand you to say that you are ... confessing?"

"Yes sir," said Fred Weasley. "I didn't think anyone would be able to figure out how I did it so easily, but then Professor Lockhart here traced it back to George, and I don't want him to get into trouble for something that was entirely my fault. *I* was the one who portkeyed the Slytherins' locker with all their clothes and their wands out of the locker room and into the Slytherin dungeons. George had nothing to do with it, and I used his notes without his permission. Professor Lockhart's project has always been too important for him to use it for pranking. That's ... kind of been a sore subject between us. Anyway, I was angry about losing the Quidditch match so badly, and I was angry when someone I assumed was a Slytherin stole from us, so I wanted revenge. I *swear* though – I didn't think the blizzard would come in so soon and would put them in danger. I just wanted to embarrass the Slytherins, not get them hurt."

Also in the Headmaster's office were Snape, McGonagall, and Lockhart. Snape sneered at the notorious prankster with contempt. He knew perfectly well how many pranks played on his Slytherins arose from the Weasley Terrors' abuse of what he'd taught them in Potions. McGonagall looked more sad than angry, as if she was disappointed at so much wasted potential. Lockhart's expression was unreadable.

Finally, Dumbledore spoke. "What you did, young man, was a very serious infraction of our school rules, one with nearly tragic consequences. Please step outside and wait

downstairs while we discuss your punishment and contact your parents."

Fred swallowed hard and then headed down the spiral staircase before anyone spoke. Naturally, Snape was first.

"In light of what he just confessed to, Headmaster, surely expulsion is the only punishment possible."

Lockhart interrupted dismissively. "Oh, Severus, please be sensible. Headmaster, before we talk about punishment, surely we should discuss the preliminary question of '*do we believe Fred Weasley's confession*'? Because I'm not sure that I do. I think it's obvious that he's just trying to cover for his brother George who I accused earlier today even though I now believe him to be innocent."

"Why is that, Gilderoy?" asked McGonagall almost hopefully.

"Because of the way he denied it this morning. Call me arrogant, but I think I'm a pretty good judge of character and honesty. George Weasley thought my portkey project was important. Aside from being a way to define himself as separate from his twin, he also viewed the project as a way to honor the memories of his uncles Gideon and Fabian Prewett who were murdered by Death Eaters. He took it seriously enough to promise me that he would not use any of the research he was doing for me in his pranks. I believe he has kept that promise and also that his promise would have prevented him from letting Fred Weasley have enough direct access to the research for *him* to have used it for pranking as well."

Snape snorted, but Dumbledore merely looked resigned. "Personally, Gilderoy, I am inclined to agree with you. I believe that young Fred just now was confessing to

something he didn't do in order to protect his twin from unfair punishment."

"Headmaster!" exclaimed Snape angrily, but Dumbledore put up a hand before he could continue.

"*Unfortunately*, my beliefs in this matter are insufficient. A student with a past history of just this sort of mischief has confessed to *this particular* bout of mischief, one in which a number of students, some of whom are from Noble Houses, were placed in serious danger. I cannot simply *ignore* Fred Weasley's confession without actual evidence that someone else was responsible. Not unless I want to be overruled by the Board of Governors who I'm *certain* will expel him and possibly even seem to have his wand snapped, particularly since Lucius Malfoy sits on the Board and his son was among those harmed."

"So if *not* expulsion, how will you punish him, Albus?" asked McGonagall.

"Suspension, I think, for the remainder of the school year. Gilderoy, if you can prove that some other student was truly responsible for the prank, I will allow young Fred to return. If not, he will have to repeat his Fourth Year." Dumbledore shrugged slightly. "Who knows? Perhaps if Fred and George have to take all their classes separately, it might have a beneficial effect on them both."

The teachers talked for a few more minutes. Then, McGonagall went down to retrieve Fred while Dumbledore activated the Floo and called out for the Office of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. He was not looking forward to explaining what had happened to Arthur Weasley.

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## **An empty hallway near Gryffindor Tower**

**7:20 p.m.**

Jim was lost in thought as he headed towards his dorm after dinner. He was alone, Neville having gone on to a meeting of Team Protector. He'd actually considered tagging along, but then he remembered that he wouldn't be particularly welcome there after the boggart prank. Besides, he was a Gryffindor and no coward. A few anonymous students had hit him with minor hexes when he wasn't looking that day, but none with the guts to attack him directly ... so far. Consequently, despite everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, Jim still felt safe walking the halls of Hogwarts alone. That was about to change.

While walking down a deserted stretch of hallway, Jim stiffened as he heard a noise behind him, but just as he started to turn, a thick heavy bag came down over his head and tightened around his neck. Before he could react, he heard a guttural voice rasp out a **PETRIFICUS TOTALUS**. Instantly, all of Jim's limbs were frozen, leaving him unable to defend himself when the second attacker walked up and gut-punched him so hard he couldn't breathe for several seconds. Then, the two attackers (for he could feel four sets of hands) dragged him into an empty class and threw him painfully to the ground.

And then they started kicking him in the ribs, arms and legs.

After a minute or so of that, the attackers dropped down next to him and began to talk, their voices distorted by some magical obscuring effect.

*"We believed in you, Potter!"* said one angrily. *"We believed all that garbage about how you were the Chosen One who*

*defeated You-Know-Who! And all this time, you were a filthy Parselmouth! A Dark Lord in training! You're a disgrace to Gryffindor House!"*

*"I lost family to You-Know-Who and those filthy Death Eaters!" said the other. "How dare you sully their memory with gifts you took from that monster! And you call yourself a Lion?! You make me sick!"*

That last outburst was followed by the sound of the attacker spitting on him. But then, a third voice – a young girl, it sounded like – cried out.

"Hey! Get away from him, you creeps!"

There was a commotion, and Jim heard some curses thrown, a scream from the girl, and then the sound of his two (apparently Gryffindor) attackers running off. They must have gotten some licks in on his savior, because Jim heard a hiss of pain from her before she made her way over to where he lay, still petrified.

"Easy, Potter. ***FINITE INCANTATEM.***" Jim's arms and legs relaxed, and he let out a gasp of pain. He didn't think anything was broken, but he would have some ugly bruises unless he went to the Infirmary, which he did *not* want to do. A few seconds later, the bag was ripped off Jim's head, but he could still barely see as the room was dark.

"Who are you?" he asked. The girl hesitated and then cast a Lumos. Jim gasped again, this time in surprise at his savior's identity: Amaryllis Wilkes.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, Potter, me," she replied. "Is that a problem? I can go yell for those bullies to come back if you'd prefer them."

He made a face. "No thanks. Did you see who they were?"

"No, the lights were off. I dove for cover once they started firing hexes at me, and then they ran off out the other door. Guess they didn't want to get caught by somebody without a bag over his head." She hesitated. "I did hear them ranting about you being a disgrace to Gryffindor, though." Jim winced at that. He was badly shaken to think that there might be fellow Gryffindors who would go to such lengths. The Slytherin firstie looked down at him. "You look awful, Potter. Do you need help getting to the Infirmary?"

"I'm not going to the Infirmary. I'm going to my dorm."

"Fair enough. Guess I'll be going to the Infirmary by myself." And at that, Jim noticed a tear on her sleeve that was slightly damp with blood.

"You're hurt!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah. Just a graze though. Didn't duck as fast as I should have. Luckily, it was only a small Cutting Hex." Amy stood and headed for the door, holding her hand over the cut in her arm. Jim watched her as she left, still grappling with the realization that fellow Gryffindors had assaulted him like cowardly thugs until the child of a Death Eater saved him. She was almost out the door when Jim grimaced and called out to her.

"Wait a second, Wilkes. I'll walk you to the Infirmary."

She stiffened as she looked back to him. "I don't need Gryffindor chivalry, Potter. And I don't need pity, either."

"Well, then, it's a good thing I wasn't offering either, Wilkes. I just decided that you were right, and I probably should let Madam Pomfrey check me over."

With that, the two students headed off towards the Infirmary. They walked in silence for a while before Jim spoke again. "So, what made you decide to ... rescue me?" he finally asked.

Amy looked over to the Boy-Who-Lived. "I've got experience with people trying to punish me for things I was born with and have no control over," she said somewhat bitterly. Jim nodded at that, as it was a concept he was suddenly coming to appreciate himself. The rest of the trip to the Infirmary was spent in silence.

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About an hour later, Amyrillis Wilkes entered the Slytherin Common Room with a foul expression on her face as she made her way over to the corner where Cassius Warrington held court over his circle of Pureblood friends and associates.

"Success, Wilkes?" he inquired.

She sneered at him. "Yeah. As far as Jim Potter knows, he was attacked by a pair of bigoted Gryffindors and rescued by the plucky young Death Eater's daughter." She glanced down at the tear in her sleeve. "You owe me a new robe."

Cassius waved his hand condescendingly. "We had to make it look realistic, Wilkes. You know that."

"Whatever. Just remember our deal. I do this for you, and you keep your goons away from me and Ginny Weasley."

"I'll remember our deal, Wilkes. You just remember *your* part of it."

The disgusted glare Amy gave the arrogant Pureblood made it quite plain that she did.



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## ***Gryffindor Tower***

### ***9:00 p.m.***

There had been tears and shouting and finally resigned hugs. Ron, George, Ginny and Percy were all speechless at the news that Fred had been suspended for the rest of the year. George, in particular, was furious with his twin for confessing to something Fred hadn't done out of a desire to protect *him* over something *he* hadn't done either.

Meanwhile, Ron openly cried and seemed devastated that Fred had taken his idea for self-sacrifice and used it himself. Ginny, to her own surprise, did not cry but instead adopted an expression of fierce determination. Undeterred by his families comments, Fred maintained that he was guilty of the prank against the Slytherins and stoically accepted his suspension, even though George and Ron refused to believe him. With one final round of hugs, Fred picked up his trunk and left Gryffindor Tower with Arthur Weasley, who seemed more sad than angry, as if he'd failed his son somehow.

Soon after, Percy escorted Ginny back to the Slytherin dungeon, while George and Ron watched out the window through the dim moonlight as Arthur and Fred walked down the freshly shoveled pathway towards the Hogwarts gate. From there, Arthur would Side-Along-Apparate the two of them back to the Burrow, presumably just in time for hours of tearful lectures from Molly. As soon as they were gone, George left for his room which was now one bed emptier. Ron continued to stare out the window towards the spot where he last saw Fred while occasionally wiping tears from his eyes. But after a few minutes and without even realizing he was doing so, the boy reached down with his hand to rest it on the black notebook that the young Gryffindor seemed to carry everywhere. As he softly (and unconsciously) stroked the soft leather cover, his heartfelt

feelings of sadness and concern for his brother faded like a candle starved of oxygen, while memories of cruel pranks and hurtful insults rose up in their place, stoking an anger that should have faded with time but which now was as fresh as it was painful. Ron straightened his back and lifted his chin, his sad expression melting away into one of cruel arrogance.

"Who's the Prankmaster Weasley now, *Freddikins*?" he said softly to no one but himself. And for the briefest instant, Ron Weasley's blue eyes flashed an angry red.

# Home for the Holidays

## CHAPTER 32: Home for the Holidays

***21 December 1992***

*9:00 a.m.*

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" asked Harry as he continued to pack his trunk for the Christmas holidays.

"Yes," replied Theo irritably. "I'll stay in bounds and avoid any creepy evil mirrors. Besides, Ginny, Amy and Marcus are all staying over. That's three times as many Slytherins as I had to talk to this time last year."

"So explain again why you're not riding the train with the rest of us?" asked Blaise. "You're missing out on one of our beloved school traditions – being cooped up with all your peers for six hours in tiny compartments that smell like cheap faux leather."

Harry looked at him quizzically. "Why would you say it smells like cheap faux leather? I'm fairly certain the compartments are actually furnished with expensive real leather."

"Don't evade the question."

Harry shrugged. "After everything that's happened, the Potters and Dumbledore decided that it would be best for me to Floo straight to Potter Manor rather than take the train and be exposed to mad assassins and crazed house elves for six hours or more. Neville and Jim are going the same way."

"Hmph," Zabini replied almost petulantly. "I wish I could. I'll have to take the train to London, meet Gunther, and then take an international portkey to Marseilles." He made a face. "I *hate* international portkeys."

"Why Marseilles?" Harry asked. "I thought you spent the holidays in New York every year."

He shrugged. "Mother usually has some sort of get-together of the night of the Winter Solstice for some of her friends. this year, it's in Marseilles."

"Hmm," Theo said. "A solstice party. Sounds ... kind of pagan, actually."

"Not really," Blaise replied. "Just an excuse to break out the champagne a few days early."

Harry finished packing his trunk and gave his best Slytherin friends goodbye hugs. Then, he lugged the trunk down to the Common Room and outside into the corridor just as Professor Snape rounded the corner.

"Punctual as usual, Potter. Your Gryffindor traveling companions will no doubt be late, which gives us a few minutes to confer." Snape produced a piece of paper which he handed to the boy. Then, he gestured at the heavy trunk with his wand and shrank it down until it would fit into Harry's pocket. "One of your parents will be able to restore it to its normal size with a Finite." He hesitated thoughtfully. "Ask you mother first. She is the more competent of the two. I imagine your imbecilic father will accidentally explode the trunk or set it on fire or something else equally ridiculous."

Harry nodded in agreement as he pocketed the trunk and then opened the note. It had just a few words in Snape's

familiar handwriting, but no signature.

*Perceptual Dilation*

*also-known-as*

*Fixing the Mind's Gaze Betwixt the Seven Beats of the Heart*

"Sir?" Harry asked in confusion.

"My understanding is that you will be meeting with your Occlumency instructor at least once over the break. On the note are written the two most common names for an obscure Occlumency sub-skill you might find valuable. I prefer the first name, but traditionalist Occlumens as well as those more given to poetry prefer the second. Not knowing anything about your instructor, I have included both names. Either way, it is a technique for using Occlumency to improve reflexes and speed up one's thought processes." Snape sniffed somewhat disdainfully at the boy. "I do not wish to see a repeat of your sluggish response time should you be forced to publicly duel the Other Potter again."

Harry furrowed his brow. It should have been obvious to Snape that he was only the tiniest bit slower than his brother, and the two of them were much faster than anyone else in the dueling club. Nevertheless, Snape seemed to have taken the view that Jim had utterly dominated Harry in their one-on-one duel before all the craziness with the giant chaos-snake (as Theo had taken to calling it) ended things prematurely.

The two made their way to Dumbledore's office. As Snape anticipated, the other boys had not yet arrived. After the Headmaster welcomed Harry into the office, the boy was

startled by a trilling sound from a perch near the man's desk. It was a young-looking phoenix fresh from a recent burning day.

"And this must be Fawkes, I presume," Harry said somewhat excitedly. The bird preened itself proudly as Dumbledore chuckled. Harry looked up at the bird's owner. "Professor Flitwick says Jim and I both have wand cores with feathers which came from Fawkes." The boy crooked his head. "Is that ... unusual?"

"No more so than the existence of magical twins in the first place, my boy. I do not know about the Patil sisters, but if memory serves, both Fred and George Weasley just happened to have wands crafted from the exact same dogwood tree even though they were crafted very differently. I was quite surprised, however, when Fawkes surrendered *two* feathers at the same time. He has only yielded one other feather suitable for wand-making during this century, and that was over seventy years ago."

"Really, sir? Do you happen to know who got that wand?"

Dumbledore smiled. "You might be pleased to know that it went to a brilliant young Slytherin by the name of ..." Before he could finish that sentence, there was a knock at the door, and then McGonagall and Lily Potter entered the office, followed by Jim and Neville.

"Ah, Professors McGonagall and Potter, along with your young charges. Harry, perhaps we shall continue our conversation after the holidays. Do you still wish to be tested on your Occlumency in January?"

"Yes, Headmaster, if that's convenient for you."

"Quite so, my boy. Quite so."

Minutes later, all three boys stepped out of the fireplace at Potter Manor. Augusta Longbottom and James Potter were waiting on them. Neville went to his grandmother and gave her a hug, while James regarded his two sons. He smiled at Harry with a warmth that actually surprised the wary Slytherin, though Harry thought that warmth was marred by a nervous tension that the man seemed incapable of concealing.

"Harry. Jim. It's great to see you both home for the holidays. Hopefully, it will be a lot more enjoyable than the last time you two were here. Jim, why don't you show your brother and your friend up to their rooms. Lunch is at noon."

Jim hesitated for a few seconds, during which he stared at his father as if waiting for something. Finally, he turned to Harry. "Come on," he said tersely. Harry, who had grown up with the Dursleys, sensed that there had been some subtext that he'd just missed out on. Neville, whose own upbringing was far less emotionally stunted than Harry's, realized the truth instantly, but it only made him more uncomfortable at the thought of how this vacation would go.

Jim had been expecting his father to give him a hug.

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***21 December 1992***

***5:00 p.m. at Malfoy Manor***

When Draco disembarked from the Hogwarts Express, his parents were waiting on him, but immediately, he could tell that something was different. His mother hugged him and kissed his forehead, and as they were leaving Platform Nine and Three-Quarters for the apparation point, his father made small talk about how Draco's fall semester had been. Still, there was a ... perfunctory quality to it all that Draco

found worrisome. By 4:30, the Malfoys were back home, and Draco had been sent up to his room to freshen up from the long train ride. Priage, the Malfoys' chief elf, informed the boy that his father wanted to meet with him in Lord Malfoy's study at 5:00 and that dinner would be served at 7:00. The announcement made Draco oddly nervous – he couldn't imagine what his father would want to speak to him about that might take up to two hours.

At the stroke of five, Draco knocked on the door to his father's study.

"Enter," came the languid voice from within. Draco cautiously stepped into the study. His father was seated behind the huge gilded desk that had been in the family since before the days of Louis XIV. There was a single chair that had been placed in front of the desk. Lucius nodded towards the chair, and Draco sat down.

"I wished to speak to you, Draco, because I have heard some ... intriguing stories about the school term just ended. I wish to hear your account of them. And perhaps your explanation for your own conduct."

Draco stiffened in his chair. "Father?"

"I am reliably informed, Draco, that you have undertaken an association with ... a *Mudblood* by the name of Justin Finch-Fletchley. Is my information correct?"

Draco took two slow breaths before responding. "Yes, Father. That is correct."

"Explain yourself."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley may be the first wizard in his family line, Father, but that family line is descended from *Muggle*



*aristocracy*. His immediate family members possess wealth and power within Muggle society that is equal to if not greater than our own family's status in wizarding society."

Lucius stared at his son intently. "And you believe that mere wealth is enough to elevate a family of Muggles to being equal to our own?"

Draco exhaled slowly. "What I *believe*, Father, is that Justin's family understands power even if they've never had the kind of power *we* take for granted. And as a result, I believe Justin will learn to command power in ways beyond what either his Muggle family ... or most Purebloods can imagine." Lucius considered that in silence, so Draco pressed on. "Tell me, Father, do *you* know what a *stock exchange* is?"

Lucius's eyes narrowed slightly. "I am ... familiar with the term."

"Then perhaps you can explain to me why wizards *don't* have one. Is it something the Muggles have thought of that we just haven't yet?"

Lucius went very still at that, and Draco suddenly began to wonder if he'd overstepped his bounds. Then, in a swift motion, Lucius slid his holdout wand from its place of concealment in the walking stick that never left the man's side. Draco's eyes widened.

*"Okay, my father is about to use the Cruciatus on me. I guess I did push too far."*

But to Draco's surprise and relief, Lucius aimed his wand over the boy's shoulder and fired off powerful locking and privacy charms at the door. Then, he rested the wand in his

lap and regarded his son intently for a moment before speaking.

"The current wizarding population in Great Britain is less than 30,000. It is less than half a million in Europe and about five million worldwide. Generally, but particularly in Britain, material wealth among witches and wizards is concentrated within the top 1% of the population. By some estimates, the twenty richest wizards in Britain collectively hold more galleons than the bottom three-quarters combined. Because there is so little liquidity held by the vast majority of wizards and witches, a stock exchange is an inefficient medium for investment. Rather than sell shares in a new business venture on an open market, wizards who seek to start new businesses instead sell stakes in them either to Gringotts or, more commonly, to wealthy individuals. Thus, broadly speaking, our economic system more closely mimics the Roman patronage system rather than modern Muggle venture capitalism."

Draco stared in confusion. He'd understood less than half of what Lucius had said. A ghost of a smile tugged at the man's mouth before he waved his wand towards a nearby bookshelf and a multi-volume series on the wizarding history of Constantinople blurred into the shapes of several very different books. One of them then floated over and landed on the desk in front of Draco, a heavy and slightly beaten tome entitled ***Economics in One Lesson*** by someone named Henry Hazlitt.

The boy looked back and forth in utter confusion between the patently Muggle economics textbook and the former Death Eater who revealed its presence to him.

"Um," he said articulately.

Lucius reclined in his chair. "After graduating from Hogwarts, I spent several years in France pursuing a Charms apprenticeship. This was ... before I knew your mother. My master was insistent that I have a well-rounded education to fill in what he considered to be egregious gaps in the Hogwarts curriculum, in particular what was at that time an appallingly poor Muggle Studies program. In 1974, I had the pleasure of attending a seminar on the topic of Muggle economics presented by the Muggle Studies professor from Durmstrang."

"The Muggle Studies professor ... from Durmstrang," Draco said uncertainly. He'd assumed that if Durmstrang had a Muggle Studies class, it probably focused on proper vivisection techniques.

"It may surprise you to know, Draco, that Durmstrang's curriculum is substantially broader and more open-minded than most British wizards would lead you to believe. There was a reason, after all, for my stated desire that you attend Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts. On that matter, your mother exercised certain ... marital privileges to overrule my preference."

The boy nodded, uncertain whether this was a dream or not. "And after this seminar, you began a study of the Muggle stock markets?"

"Not a study, Draco, so much as an aggressive diversification. You have no doubt heard it said that I am the sixth wealthiest wizard in Britain. What is *not* said because I have concealed the knowledge from the wizarding world is that today the galleons in my Gringotts vault only make up less than half of my true net worth. The majority of my holdings are invested in the Muggle world through the goblins and other intermediaries. If those

holdings were counted as part of my 'official' fortune, my placement would be several spots higher. That said, even when counting all my personal assets, our family is still not as prosperous as that of your young Muggleborn friend. Indeed, when your budding relationship with Mr. Finch-Fletchley was brought to my attention, I had my agents make inquiries as to his family background. The results were ... illuminating."

"Really?" Draco asked in surprise. "How so?"

Lucius pulled a file out of a desk drawer and opened it. Draco saw as he did so that the name "*Finch-Fletchley*" was on the cover.

"While the Finch-Fletchley family's wealth is impressive, I was even more surprised to discover the boy's wizarding heritage. His grandfather, Jonathan Woodnutt, the Duke of Forgill, can trace his family tree almost back to Mary, Queen of Scots. I say *almost* because the Queen's son who was progenitor of his bloodline, Robert Prince, was written out of Muggle history books after he displayed signs of magic in early infancy. You see, the existence of a wizard who was also a potential claimant to the thrones of France, Scotland *and* England was unacceptable to both wizards and Muggles of the day. All memories and records of Mary's infant son were erased, and Richard was stolen away to be raised in France by the Court Wizard to King Henry IV. He graduated from Beauxbatons in 1580 before leaving France for Scotland where he founded the House of Prince, and he lived just long enough to see his family elevated to a Noble seat on the Wizengamot in 1655. The Woodnutt line formally diverged from the House of Prince in 1699 when Robert Prince's squib great-granddaughter married Duncan Woodnutt, the Earl of Dunbar who was created the first Duke of Forgill that same year."

Lucius smiled warmly at his astonished son, who struggled to absorb all that his father was saying. "Congratulations, my son. While it may not have been your intention, you have through cunning and diplomacy successfully ingratiated yourself to a potential claimant for an incredibly powerful but currently dormant seat on the Wizengamot."

Suddenly unable to maintain his decorum, Draco grinned and let out a laugh.

Two hours later, a nervous Prixie informed the fuming Narcissa Black Malfoy that her husband and son were still talking and would take their dinner in the master's study and that she should begin eating without them.

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***21 December 1992***

***9:30 CET (local time) just outside Marseilles, France***

Blaise Zabini dropped to his knees and fought down the urge to vomit after the arduous portkey journey from London to the farmhouse in Marseilles. Gunther silently rubbed the boy's back for a few seconds and then handed him a potion to sooth the travel sickness. Thus fortified, Blaise rose to take in the view and smiled. He'd always loved the farmhouse, a charming two-story structure typical of Provence's rural architecture that sat on a tall hill overlooking the rolling farmland and vineyards below. It was here that Gunther had taught him how to ride horses and to throw a punch and (late at night after the Countess had retired) how to play poker and talk to girls. It was tiny, of course, compared to the Palais de la Comtesse de Provence, but Blaise *hated* the Palais, and respectful of his wishes, Serena Zabini never made her son visit that place. It was only fair, after all. He was the one who, on the morning of his eighth birthday, discovered Le Comte's dead

body slumped over the breakfast table. Le Comte (Blaise had utterly refused to call him anything but "Le Comte") had been a horrifically obese wizard with remarkably poor table manners for someone of his social standing. On the day in question, the man had taken too large a bite from his pain au chocolat and choked to death. It was *easily* Blaise's *worst birthday ever*.

After soaking in the scene, Blaise quickly followed Gunther into the house through a side entrance. The Countess's guests were already here, an eclectic mix of family, friends and ... others. While Gunther stashed Blaise's trunk to be emptied in the morning, the boy darted up the side stairs to his room to freshen up and change clothes. Unlike Wizarding Britain, with its odd affection for robes, pointed hats, and other anachronisms, the current fashion of Wizarding France called for contemporary Muggle styles but with a distinct wizarding twist. When Blaise descended the main stairs to greet the guests and find his mother, he was attired in an immaculate suit of crushed black-green velvet with an open-necked black silk shirt underneath. A stick pin in the shape of a silver and green cobra adorned his lapel, last year's Christmas gift from the Countess to acknowledge his place among the Chosen of Slytherin.

Blaise finally found the Countess in a side room where chairs had been set up for the memorial ceremony. Among the Countess and her fellow travelers, the Winter Equinox was the perfect night for such memorials. It was the longest night of the year, and the walls between the living and the dead were at their thinnest, ideal for letting those who had been loved and lost know that they were not forgotten. With the Countess was Jacques Delacour, an official with the French Ministry with whom she was discussing the final details for tonight's services. Blaise frowned. He hoped that Delacour's wife and daughters were not present. Apolline

Delacour was half-veela, while Fleur and Gabrielle were each quarter-veela, and while Blaise was generally confident in his Occlumency, he did not wish to pit it against supernatural allure on this night of all nights.

After concluding her business with M. Delacour, Serena crossed over to Blaise and gave him a strong motherly hug. "*Passerotto!* It is so good to see you at last! You had no problems getting here?"

"None, *mamma*. Nothing a Stomach-Soother couldn't cure. Have I missed anything?"

"No, *mio figlio*. We have plenty of time before we begin. Do you wish to pay your respects now or later?"

"Now, I think."

The Countess nodded and led Blaise off to one side of the room where a long narrow table had been set up along the wall. On it were dozens of photographs surrounded by votive candles. Most of the photos were magical and held moving images of people who waved to onlookers. Quite a few, however, were static Muggle photos, including the one that now held Blaise Zabini's attention. Within it were two figures: a man with regal African features and a beautiful Italian woman who bore a remarkable resemblance to the Countess Zabini, both attired in what looked like Muggle hospital scrubs and lab coats, and each with a doctor's stethoscope around the neck. In front of the picture were two votive candles, one of which was already lit. Blaise's eyes blinked repeatedly as he studied the picture while the Countess held a firm hand on his shoulder. Then, he picked up a long match and used it to light the other votive candle before reaching down the open collar of his shirt to draw forth a small amulet on a silver chain. Inscribed on the

simple black facing was an open silver triangle enclosed by a silver circle and bisected by a vertical silver line. Blaise lifted the amulet up to his mouth and kissed it lightly before grasping it in his hands.

"*Novissima autem inimica destruetur mors.*" The boy softly recited the Latin verse in a soft voice without ever taking his eyes off of the photograph.

"*Omnes ave dominum mortis,*" the Countess said in answer.

"So mote it be," they said together in English.

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**23 December 1992**

**9:00 a.m. in the Leaky Cauldron**

Harry stepped out of the Leaky Cauldron's fireplace bearing an expression of mild annoyance. He'd not been sure what to expect from James Potter when he agreed to spend Christmas with them, but cloying protectiveness had not been among his predicted behaviors. Case in point: Artie Podmore had gone to great lengths to set up some Occlumency sessions over the Christmas holidays, but James Potter – who had asked more questions about Harry's life in the last two days than in all the previous time since the two had met on Privet Drive – insisted that the whole family should make a day of it in Diagon Alley. It was frustrating to Harry, who'd wanted to focus on Occlumency without getting distracted by the increasingly tense Potter Family Drama. It was beyond frustrating to Jim, who'd reacted to Harry's presence in Potter Manor with sullen resentment. The *odd* thing, however, was that Harry didn't think his twin resented *him* at the moment so much as their father. Granted, the man was a Gryffindor not known for subtlety, but even Lady Augusta and Neville noticed the way



James had been trying to instantly forge a father-son relationship with Harry while ignoring the other son who'd just finished a very stressful fall term. Jim had been quietly fuming since they'd arrived at Potter Manner, and Harry was wondering whether he'd make it to Christmas before blowing up in some entertaining way.

Almost immediately, Artie was on hand to intercept the Potters, to thank a surprised James for delivering Harry on time, and to shuffle Harry upstairs before James could even speak. In Room 13, Mr. X and Mr. Y were already waiting.

"You should have contacted me the minute you decided on this ill-considered plan to spend Christmas with your parents, Harry," Artie said crossly. "If you were bent on this course of action, I'd have made arrangements to be there with you. I still can if you need..."

"No, Artie," Harry said forcefully. "Just ... no. You don't need to spend the holidays at Potter Manor where... where you have unpleasant memories."

Artie sighed. "If you mean '*where my wife died*,' Harry, just say so. And while your compassion for my feelings does you credit, you forget – *I'm* the solicitor, and *you're* the client. As ... unpleasant as time at Potter Manor might be, I am more than capable of setting them aside to perform my duties."

"Artie, it doesn't matter. It's done. Lady Augusta is staying there, and she's more than capable of keeping an eye on me. And besides, you *know* me. And you *know* I'm not going to be taken in by James Potter." With that, Harry turned to Mr. X and Mr. Y. "Thank you both for meeting with me on such short notice. Shall we proceed?" The two mystery-wizards looked at one another and then nodded towards Harry.

Downstairs, James was still complaining about how his Heir had been rudely snatched away from him, when his *other* son spoke up.

"Dad, Harry came here for Occlumency training. Just let him do what he came here for."

For a second, James seemed annoyed by Jim's tone. But then, Lily moved to stand behind Jim with her hands on his shoulders, and the look she gave her husband made the man back down.

"Perhaps you're right, Jim," he said. "Harry's supposed to be here till lunchtime. You guys can go off for some shopping . Now, what are you looking to buy today? Christmas presents for your friends?"

"A few," Jim said with a nod. In truth, the number of people he felt inclined to buy a present for could be counted on one hand. "Also, you'd offered to buy me a familiar last year, but I didn't think I'd need a pet back then. Is that offer still ...?"

James waved his hand. "Sure, sure. Anything you want." He reached into his pocket and tossed a small bag of galleons to the boy. "Lily, Lady Augusta, why don't you take the boys out into the Alley? Meet back here at noon, and I'll buy everyone lunch."

Lily and Augusta looked at one another for a second before ushering the two boys out of the tavern and out into Diagon Alley. James watched them leave and then took a seat with a view of the stairs which Harry had just ascended.

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Upstairs, Harry and Mr. X had just begun the day's Occlumency training. After about ninety minutes, the instructor signaled for a break.

"My congratulations, Mr. Potter. I feel confident in saying that you have completely mastered the second level of Occlumency. You are able to suppress your emotions at will without the need to do so constantly, you were able to detect my intrusion every time, and you were able to mount a consistent defense. Beyond this point, you have the basic psychic defenses needed to foil a Legilimens. That does *not* mean you can do so against any and every Legilimens, as true psychic duels largely come down to experience and willpower. But you now have the *tools* to defend yourself against any attacker and the means to perfect those tools going forward."

"Thank you," Harry said with an exhausted smile. "So what's next? What's involved in mastering level three Occlumency?"

"The second level is about mastering your emotions, Mr. Potter. The third level is about *understanding* them – about recognizing when you are acting in response to an emotional stimulus rather than rational decision-making. The level three exercises will also further improve your memory and recall. At this level, you will also begin the construction of a memory palace, a psychic landscape in which all of your memories can be safeguarded and which you can use as a fortress against more powerful psychic attacks."

Mr. X wrote some notes on a piece of parchment and passed it over to Harry. "These are the page numbers for exercises found within the two Occlumency texts you have been using. Please note that we will now be spending more time in ***Pathways of the Mind***, a more esoteric and abstract book. Your progress may slow a bit, at least in the beginning. But if you persevere, I believe based on your

current rate of development that you may master Level Three by the end of next summer if not sooner."

Harry nodded as he read over the note. Then, he started. "Oh, I almost forgot. Professor Snape said to ask if you could teach me this." He handed Snape's note over to the instructor who examined it silently for several seconds.

"Your Potions Master sent this for you?" The boy nodded. "Does he wish you ill?"

"Um, I don't think so," replied Harry uneasily. "Why?"

"Because perceptual dilation has a non-trivial chance of causing brain damage or even death if used incorrectly."

"... oh," said Harry. "Um, well, I guess I'd better use it correctly then. Is it something you think is within my abilities?"

Mr. X looked at the note again. "I believe so. The technique is not particularly hard to learn, but it is also not particularly useful until fully mastered, a time-intensive process. Perceptual dilation slows down your subjective awareness of time, allowing you to study your surroundings more thoroughly and make decisions more efficiently. In combat, it might be easier for you to sidestep a curse if you perceive it as moving more slowly than it actually is."

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. "That seems ... very useful. Why isn't this skill more commonly known?"

"Because in addition to requiring at least a second-level mastery of Occlumency, it also takes many months of practice to use the technique in any beneficial way and often a year or more of dedicated effort for true competency. The skill is historically known as "*Fixing the*

*Mind's Gaze Betwixt the Seven Beats of the Heart*," the archaic name from the medieval text ***Aegis Mentalis***. It is called that because the state of heightened perception can only be maintained for a duration equal to seven beats of the Occlumen's heart. Needless to say, it is essential that you maintain your calm so as to keep your heart rate as slow as possible in order to gain the maximum benefit. The technique will then essentially slow down your perception of time as it passes *between* heart beats. Initially, the benefits are meager – you might experience two or three seconds of time between heart beats instead of one. With practice and experience, you can extend that duration. The 19th Century Master Occlumens Werner von Mises claimed that he could subjectively experience almost a full minute of time between each beat of his heart. The *danger* is that if you maintain the altered mental state for *more* than that *or* if you extend the duration between heartbeats to more than your Occlumency skill allows, you risk suffering an aneurysm or stroke. Which, incidentally, is how von Mises died."

Harry swallowed. "Thank you for the warning, Mr. X. I promise I'll be careful."

Mr. X studied the boy impassively for almost five seconds (though Harry now wondered if the man was thinking for a lot longer than that, given what Harry now understood of perceptual dilation). "Very well," he said with a shrug. "You have prepaid for my services through next summer, and I don't give refunds to students who accidentally lobotomize themselves. Now here's how you activate the perceptual dilation effect."

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***Meanwhile in Magical Menagerie***

Jim entered the pet store first and with a purpose. Neville and Augusta were close behind followed by a surprised Lily Potter who called out to her youngest son. On the way to the pet store, the Boy-Who-Lived had stopped to sign a few autographs, but to Lily's concern, not as many as usual. In fact, she was quite certain she saw one witch pull her small children across the street to specifically avoid having Jim cross their path. She almost didn't notice when Jim bypassed Eeylops Owl Emporium for Magical Menagerie.

"Jim? I thought you were after an owl," she said tentatively.

"No," he said simply as he strode through the store, with the others following behind. Jim made his way to the back corner of the store, a rather dusty and dimly lit back corner within the otherwise charming pet shop. To Lily's mounting alarm, this corner was where Magical Menagerie's supply of snakes and other reptiles were to be found, animals more often sold for potions ingredients than as pets. Jim stopped and looked around, as if to make sure that no one except his three companions could hear. Then, he turned to face the snake cages and *hissed*. Instantly, all of the snakes, about twenty or so, reared up and turned to look directly at the boy before hissing back to him almost in unison.

Lily looked around wildly to see if anyone else in the store was watching the scene while Neville took a step forward.

"Uh, Jim? What are you saying to them?" asked Neville quietly.

"Oh, I'm just letting them know I'm a Speaker and asking if any of them would like to come with me and be a Speaker's pet snake. You know. The usual." With that, the boy moved closer to the cages and picked several snakes in particular to hiss at, as if he were interviewing them for a job opening.

Lily moved up right behind him and put her hand firmly on his shoulder.

"Jim Potter!" she hissed (in English, of course). "You stop this right now. I did not bring you to Diagon Alley today for you to cause a scene!"

He turned and looked up at his mother with a deceptively calm expression. "No, Mum, you brought me here because Dad insisted on coming with Harry and making today a father-son outing, and you didn't want me to sit at home and brood over it. Anyway, I want this one." He pointed back to a two-foot long snake with brown and yellow scales. "He says he's a California king snake." The snake hissed something, and Jim nodded. "*Lampropeltis getula californiae*. His name is Steve."

"Jim, you *cannot* buy a snake and then run around in public talking to it," Lily said in a pained voice. "You know what people will think about that!"

"Yeah, I know exactly what people will think. They'll think the same thing they've been thinking for almost two weeks now – that the Boy-Who-Lived is a dark wizard. That's why I don't walk around the school anymore unless I've got one of my few remaining friends to watch my back."

"What?" Lily asked in alarm. "What do you mean...?"

"It doesn't matter," Jim interrupted. "People are going to believe what they want to, and I can't do anything about it so I might as well ... embrace it."

Lily stepped forward and pulled Jim into a tight hug. "Jim! I know this has been hard on you. I'd have given anything to spare you from it. But that doesn't mean you should just give in and make things worse! And I am telling you right

now – buying a snake for Christmas and carrying it back to Hogwarts, to say nothing of *Potter Manor*, will *make things worse!*"

Jim sighed loudly and then, with a single backward glance towards "*Steve*," he walked past his mother and out of the store. Lily followed, sparing an embarrassed glance at Lady Augusta whose face was impassive. After she'd left, Neville exhaled loudly and looked up at the older witch.

"I'm sorry I dragged you into all this ... whatever this is, Gran," the boy said.

"Oh, don't apologize, Neville," she answered with an odd smile. "I feel for the boy's unhappiness, but other than that, this is the most interesting Christmas holiday I've had in *years*. It's like a Muggle soap opera but with talking snakes!"

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At noon, the Potters and Longbottoms reassembled back at the Leaky Cauldron for lunch in one of the inn's small private rooms. James and Harry were already sitting together, with Harry politely but evasively answering James's questions about his Occlumency training. When Jim sat down on the opposite side of the table from his father and brother while wearing a tired expression, James looked over at him in surprise.

"I thought you were getting an owl," he asked.

"Changed my mind," Jim replied in a clipped tone while diligently studying a menu. "No pets for the Boy-Who-Lived today."

James looked at him quizzically for a second and then shrugged. "Well, maybe this summer then. Did everyone get



their shopping done? Harry, do you need to pick anything up?"

"No, thank you. I actually owl-ordered everything a month ago."

Harry split his attention between his father's forced Christmas spirit, his brother's obvious unhappiness, and Neville's visible horror at the Potter family dynamics. At this point, Harry honestly wasn't sure whether his presence made things better or worse. On one hand, James's renewed interest in him was plainly based on the man's reaction to Jim being a Parselmouth. On the other, Harry thought it was possible that James was forced to at least be civil with Jim when Harry was around, and he might well be even more openly intolerant of a Parselmouth son if Harry hadn't come. In any case, at this point, Harry thought that no amount of physical or mental torture would ever get him to admit that he too was a Parselmouth to James Potter or anyone else.

James nodded. "How about you, Jim? Done with your shopping?"

The boy didn't look up from his intense fascination with the menu. "Yeah. I bought gifts for you and Mum, plus everyone I consider a friend. That part hardly took any time at all."

Lily winced and tried to figure out how to end the day's excursion early before Jim, James or both made a public spectacle. Suddenly, Jim put the menu down and looked up.

"Actually, that's not true. I *do* need to buy one more gift. It's for, well, not really a friend but someone who really helped me out of a jam last week. Mum, it's a girl, and I have no idea what to buy for her. Nothing fancy, just a small thank-you gift."

James smiled at his younger son for the first time all day. "You have a young lady friend you're buying a Christmas present for? Good for you! You can never start too early, I say. What's the lucky girl's name?"

Jim paused while considering how to evade the question. And then, he smiled after deciding not to even bother. "Amy Wilkes," he said easily while turning his attention back fully to the menu. There was a sudden clinking sound as James Potter nearly knocked his water glass over before catching it.

"Amy ... Wilkes? The Toymaker's daughter?" James said in disbelief.

"Oh, I hardly think it's fair to hold that against her, Dad. I mean, she never even knew her parents, and like I said, she helped Boy-Who-Lived out of a difficult spot, so she's hardly Death Eater material. And surely you don't think I should be rude to her just because she's a Slytherin, right?"

"Of ... course not, I mean... *that's not the point*," James sputtered.

"Besides," Jim continued, "I'm trying to become more tolerant and open-minded where Slytherins are concerned. After all, if I hadn't been so biased against them, I might have made it into Slytherin House myself. I mean, *the Hat did offer it to me*."

There was another clinking sound. This time, it was Harry who nearly knocked his water glass over before catching it with the same grace as his father. "Sorry about that but ... *the what offered you what now?!'*"

Jim laughed out loud. "The *Sorting Hat*, Harry. Remember that? Floppy and a little smelly but with a lovely singing

voice? It offered me Slytherin at first. It said I could be great, that it was all there in my head, and that Slytherin could help me on the way to greatness. But I said no because I hated Slytherin and was afraid of disappointing other people and letting them down." There was a dead silence at the table. Jim finally looked up and around at the others.

"What?" he asked mildly.

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After lunch, as the group was preparing to Floo back to Potter Manor, Harry pulled Neville and Lady Augusta off to the side.

"Listen, I *really* want to apologize for all this, and if you want me to make some excuse for us all to head back to Longbottom Manor, I'll be happy to do so."

"Nonsense, Harry," said Augusta with gusto. "Not to make light of your situation, but watching James Potter squirm under his sons' disdain is perhaps the most fun I've had in *years*. Far better than sitting around the Manor listening to Cousin Enid natter on about macaroon recipes."

"*What Gran means*," Neville interrupted in consternation, "is that we're here for you, so don't think you need to apologize for how others are behaving."

"That too," said Augusta.

"Thank you, both of you. Honestly, I was expecting some friction in the Potter family but not ... *this*. I never imagined there could be so much tension all the time."

Augusta nodded sagely. "The tension *is* unbearable." Then, she smiled almost fondly. "I hope it will last."

Harry did a double-take. "Lady Augusta ... did... did you just quote from ***Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory***?!"

"Certainly not," she sniffed disdainfully. "*I was misquoting Oscar Wilde. I've never even *been* to a chocolate factory!*"

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### ***9:00 p.m. at Potter Manor***

"We need to talk," Lily had said to James just after they returned from Diagon Alley. She'd used that frighteningly quiet voice that James had referred to as "the Death Whisper" since their Hogwarts days. He nodded. He knew what was coming, and he knew that he'd put it off for far too long. In retrospect, he should have told her everything back before the twins were born, but his Gryffindor courage had failed him. Nowadays, he had to rely on liquid courage instead.

"Nine o'clock in the Master's Study. After the kids have gone up to their rooms." He hesitated. "Bring your wand." She gave him a look but then nodded.

At the appointed hour, she knocked on the study door. It annoyed her still that she needed to knock on any door within her own home as if she were a houseguest. But James had explained when they moved into the Manor that the Master's Study was the sanctum sanctorum of the Head of House Potter and that he himself had only been inside the room only four times prior to Charlus Potter's death, so she let the matter drop. Sort of.

James opened the door and ushered Lily inside. Immediately, she stopped and froze at the sight of a prophecy orb sitting on James's desk. "Is that...?" she said, her voice catching slightly.

"No," he replied. "It's ... a different one."

He walked past her and sat on the edge of the desk. It seemed disrespectful to sit behind it with his wife on the other side, as if she were some kind of supplicant. The look she was giving him now was bad enough.

"Another prophecy," she said coldly.

"There's *another* prophecy that you're just now telling me about."

He took a deep breath through his nose. "Yes. I never told you because, well, I held out hope that it wasn't about us. This prophecy has been in play for two centuries. And before I can reveal it to you, I'll need a secrecy oath." He held up a hand to forestall the angry response that was coming. "It's not my choice, Lily. I'm under an oath myself never to reveal it to anyone *not* bound to keep the secret."

"Fine," she said finally. "But depending on the contents, I still reserve the right to hex you for keeping it from me."

He snorted bitterly. "Fair enough. I'm sure I deserve it." She swore the oath, and then he tapped the prophecy orb. When it was finished, she asked to hear it again, giving no sign as to what she thought. Finally, after the third repetition, she was ready to speak.

"And this is the reason for your attitude towards Harry ... and now towards Jim. When Harry was Sorted into Slytherin, you assumed that he's the '*Last Potter*' who's destined to become '*Prince of Slytherin*' and kick off the rest of the prophecy."

He nodded. That was also the real reason why he'd only wanted one child, something he'd explained to Lily before their marriage and to which she'd readily acquiesced. Her

relationship with Petunia ensured that she had no desire to see any more sibling rivalry, while James wanted to avoid the possibility of '*two who should be as one set against each other in reckless hate.*' The arrival of twins had been a surprise to them both.

"And *then*, you decided the best way to respond to Harry maybe being the future Slytherin Prince was to send him a *drunken Howler!*"

James winced. "Yes, Lily-flower, *I know*. That was ... beyond stupid, and there hasn't been a day since that I haven't regretted it. But there's more to it ..." He hesitated and took a deep breath. "Jim was born after Harry, so if the prophecy really was about Harry, then ... then, it would mean that Jim was *going to die*. Die and leave Harry as the Last Potter. With Harry getting Sorted into Slytherin and especially in light of his anger towards us – justified as it might have been – *plus* the other prophecy hanging over Jim, I thought the first prophecy might mean that Harry might someday play a role in helping Voldemort come back to *kill* Jim in revenge for us abandoning him to Petunia and Vernon."

Lily started rubbing her forehead with her hand as she tried to process all the new information. James continued.

"In fact, you'll recall that originally I opposed sending Harry away despite everyone saying he was a squib. The main reason I changed my mind was this prophecy. Dad never told me about it while he was alive, and so I didn't learn of it until his will was probated and I gained full access to the restricted parts of the family vaults." He hesitated again. "The Death Eaters used to claim that Muggleborn steal their magic away from wizarding children, leaving them squibs. That's rubbish, of course, but there's a kernel of truth in it. There *are* ancient, forbidden dark rituals that

supposedly allow magic to be transferred away from a wizard to a squib. As much as I wanted to keep Harry with us, with both prophecies in play I was afraid Harry might become so bitter about being a squib that he might get hold of one of those rituals and use it to claim Jim's magic for his own. I know that sounds far-fetched, but it's the sort of thing that can happen when prophecies are involved. I mean, the mere fact that we *have* twins is suggestive – Harry and Jim are the first generation of Potters to yield more than one child since the 1780's."

Lily had wondered about that. Two hundred years of Potter fathers siring a single male child carry on the family name without deviation. No daughters. No multiple births. Not even any unplanned second children. Aside from the statistical oddity, she'd been amazed that the Potters had courted line extinction for so long. One Potter dying before he lived long enough to marry and produce an heir would have ended the family completely. She shook her head and focused on the present.

"James, after everything, surely you realize by now that trying to manipulate a prophecy only increases the likelihood that you'll inadvertently make it come true."

He barked out a laugh. "Oh, yeah, Lily. I think that's been made abundantly clear to me."

"Then why in *Merlin's name* have you suddenly decided to push Jim away? Do you not think he's *noticed* that you're now rushing to accept Harry while ignoring him?"

"I haven't been ignoring Jim. I'm just ... trying to make up for lost time with Harry."

She scoffed. "*Oh please*. Jim is revealed as a Parselmouth and *the next day* you unexpectedly invite Harry to spend

Christmas with us? And say that it's okay for *Severus* to come with him if that's what's needed to make it happen? It's *obvious* that you're treating Jim differently now that you know he can talk to snakes."

"YES! OKAY?!" he snapped. Then, he continued more calmly. "Like I said, I was concerned before that Harry might play a role in killing Jim to become the Last Potter. Now, I'm worried about the fact that Jim is the Last Potter *right now and* he already has a trait that marks him as the Heir of Slytherin, which is a name that just happened to get vandalized onto a wall next to a petrified cat while Jim's at school!"

"You think that was *Jim*?!"

"Can you guarantee 100% that it's not Jim being influenced by some subconscious remnant of Voldemort? Perhaps a dormant piece that was activated last spring when he killed Quirrell? " He sighed. "That's why I'm telling you all this, Lily-flower. You're the smart one, not me. The fate of the whole wizarding world may be at stake. I need you help me figure this out. To help me decide what to do."

Lily sat quietly as she considered James's words. "No," she finally said.

James did a double-take. "No? What do you mean, no?"

"I mean that Lord Potter may be concerned with the fate of the wizarding world, but Lily Evans-Potter is concerned with the fate of her two boys, and the rest of the wizarding world can go to hell." She rose and walked over to open the door.

"Elmo!" she called out, and the Potter's chief house elf appeared instantly. "Elmo, prepare the bedroom next to my



private study. I'll be sleeping there for the foreseeable future."

"Lily! Let's be reasonable!" James jumped up from the desk in surprise as the elf nodded and popped away. She turned back to face her husband.

"I love you, James. I always will. But right now, I don't think I have it in me to share your bed. In the past, I know I've wronged Harry, and in some ways, Jim as well. But I will do whatever it takes to keep them from harm and to protect them from anyone who threatens them." Her eyes flashed angrily. "Do not make the fatal mistake, James Potter, of leading me to think that you're a part of that group."

She turned and left the Master's Study as James let out a shuddering breath. The previous year, he'd thought that Harry's eyes were a different shade of green than his mother's. "*The same color as the killing curse*," he'd thought. Now, he realized that they weren't so different after all. When Lily was angry enough, her eyes looked like the killing curse as well.

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### ***Later in the Mistress's Boudoir***

Lily sat fuming at her desk in what the elves insisted on calling "The Mistress's Boudoir," apparently because it was unseemly for a lady to have a private study or library of her own. When James had explained about the Master's Study, she'd accepted his need for privacy ... and then asked for a room of her own that *he* couldn't get into without *her* permission. Finding the idea amusing, he set up such a room for her. He'd never even asked to enter it and almost certainly had no idea how many wards she'd put up herself over the years to keep out all intruders, including

her own husband. Not even the Potter elves could get into this room, and it endlessly annoyed the small creatures that there was a room in the Manor that they weren't allowed to clean.

As she leaned back in her chair, Lily thought long and hard about what James had just told her. Learning about the second prophecy was the perfect end to an absolutely dreadful year, one that had featured Voldemort's return, multiple attempts on Harry's life, and Jim's exposure as a Parselmouth.

"*Oh, and Vernon,*" she thought to herself. "*Mustn't forget Vernon.*"

She shook her head angrily. It was both exasperating and predictable that James had kept the other prophecy from her for so long. She did love her husband dearly, but he certainly made it difficult at times. At his best, James Potter was warm, loving, generous, and brave. At his worst, he was still the same spoiled condescending Pureblood man-child she'd spent so much time arguing with at school.

That vague condescension that he still held for his wife's Muggleborn nature was at the forefront of her mind now. *Of course* he'd conceal a prophecy handed down from Potter Lord to Potter Heir for generations from his wife even though it involved both of their children. It was *exactly* the sort of thing she might have expected from him - concealing the prophecy from her for over a decade only to seek her counsel once he'd repeatedly cocked things up. After all, how could a lowly Muggleborn, no matter how intelligent, ever have anything useful to contribute to a prophecy suggesting that either of her two sons might be the harbinger of a magical apocalypse?

Lily inhaled deeply, soaking in the familiar smells of her small study. When she was angry, nothing was better for calming her and focusing her mind than the smell of books, and that smell permeated the Boudoir. Two of the four walls were *covered* with bookshelves stretching up to the vaulted ceilings. Books, books and more books, and almost none of them fiction. Over half were obscure and esoteric magical texts on nearly every magical topic that wasn't outright illegal to read about. The rest were Muggle books, primarily in the sciences. Quite a few were textbooks that went along with the framed certificates hanging on the wall over her desk, certificates denoting that Lily Evans-Potter had successfully completed degree programs in multiple scientific fields from universities across the U.K. before pursuing a Master's in Biochemistry from St. Andrews.

After Hogwarts, she'd wanted to get a Mastery in a magical field, of course. But the War, the birth of her children, and James's new Lordship ended those plans, at least for the foreseeable future. While she'd been almost jealous of Severus for actually getting a Mastery before the age of twenty-one, she'd also been realistic. An apprenticeship was a full-time position, and between being the Lady of House Potter and the Mother of the Boy-Who-Lived, Lily simply did not have the time to pursue an advanced magical degree. Advanced *Muggle* degrees, however, were another matter. Between the ability to apparate across Britain as needed and having several house elves to watch over little Jim during her classes, it was surprisingly easy over the last ten years to complete multiple degrees. James had been supportive, of course, even though he seemed to view getting a Muggle university degree was some sort of "hobby activity" for his young wife. While intelligent in his own way, the Pureblood was almost wholly ignorant of Muggle sciences and how they might be relevant to any field of magic. In particular, he hadn't the faintest idea how

something as mysterious and Mugglish as "biochemistry" might possibly be relevant to Potions or Herbology, let alone Transfiguration.

If only he knew.

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***18 October 1992 (just over two months ago)***  
***3:00 a.m. at 4 Privet Drive, Surrey***

There was a soft click, and then light filled the room where Petunia and Vernon were sleeping. Petunia awoke and blinked her eyes, but Vernon kept right on snoring. She sat up and then gasped in surprise. For there in her bedroom, sitting in a chair that hadn't been there when Petunia went to sleep, was Lily Potter, her wand resting in her lap. Next to her was a small table that also hadn't been there before with a big thick book resting on it.

"Hello, Petunia. It's time for a family reunion."

Petunia stuck out her chin. "I have nothing to say to you. Now leave, before Vernon wakes up."

"He won't wake up before dawn, Petunia. Neither will Dudley." Lily smiled. "Magic, remember?"

Petunia sneered. "How could I forget? Magic's only been ruining my life since we were little girls." She paused. "This is about The Boy, isn't it?"

"His name is Harry, though I gather you never actually bothered to *use* his name, did you?"

"Don't you DARE come into my house with your ... *freakishness* and judge me! I took him in and raised him

and got nothing but trouble for it. You *promised me* that he would have no magic! That he would be *ordinary!*"

"I *told* you that we believed he was a squib and that he wasn't safe with us, but that if he showed any signs of magic, you should contact us and we'd take him back. You never did. You just locked him away in a boot cupboard and used him for slave labor. And you *still* act like he's the villain in this piece instead of your victim. You have the *audacity* to claim that he's the *freak* instead of you."

"Stop it!" Petunia said holding back a sob. "You don't know what it was like when he was here. The fear ..."

"I don't know and I don't care. I'm not here to talk about ancient history, Petunia. I'm here to talk about last July. The last day Harry was here. The day your husband tried to kill my son."

"Vernon did nothing! The Boy brought those ... *things* to our home!"

"Those things were called doxies, Petunia, and Harry didn't bring them. They were sent by someone else to kill him, and with Vernon's help, they very nearly did. James concealed the truth from me, but I've seen the auror report. I know *everything!*"

Petunia started to speak, but Lily cut her off abruptly. "I was stung once by a doxie. Did I ever tell you that, Petunia?" The other woman shook her head, too frightened to speak.

"It was during Fourth Year in Care of Magical Creatures. There was a mishap, and one of them stung me on the tip of my finger. And I *screamed*. It was the worst pain I'd ever felt. I actually begged someone to cut my finger off to stop the pain before somebody stunned me to shut me up. I

woke up two days later in the infirmary because the prescribed medical treatment is to knock the patient unconscious and keep them in a healing coma until the venom is fully neutralized." Lily crooked her head. "Can you just *imagine* how you'd feel if something like that had happened to your Dudley?"

"You leave my son *alone*!" Petunia shrieked.

Lily's face softened. "Petunia, Dudley is my nephew, and you're my sister. Evans blood flows in his veins just as it does mine and yours. I would *never* do anything to harm him just as I would never do anything to harm you."

Petunia gasped in relief, and after a few seconds, she began to cry. "Thank you, Lily. Thank you so much. Thank you for sparing my family."

Lily watched her sister's tears of relief impassively before she spoke again.

"Vernon's not family, Petunia," she said in a cold voice. "There's no Evans blood in his veins."

Petunia looked up sharply, fear clouding her face once more. "Lily...?"

Lily cut her off with a voice like a knife. "I brought Harry to you to be *safe*, Petunia, safe from people who would have harmed him. Or worse, people who would have used Harry to get to my other son and *harm them both*. I gave in when you demanded that I avoid contact with Harry growing up. I was willing to *never see my son's face again* if it meant he would be safe. And the people to whom I entrusted Harry abused him and tormented him and eventually your repulsive pig of a husband tried to *kill* him in the one of the

worst ways to die I can think of. *What did you think I would do when I found out?!*"

The other woman was frozen in fear of her sister and could barely gasp out the words. "Lily ... what *are* you going to do?"

"Do?" she said almost in surprise. "It's *done*, Petunia. Before I even came in here, I paid a visit to your bathroom and worked some of my *freakish magic* on Vernon's medications. I transfigured them all into other drugs that were chemically similar but which will worsen his condition rather than treat it."

Petunia glanced at the book on the table and finally noticed its title: ***Applied Pharmacology***. Lily noticed. "Yes, Petunia, magic and science working together to make the world a better place. Vernon will have another heart attack, a much worse one, within a week. Two at the most. The transfiguration is sympathetically linked to Vernon's life. The second he's dead, the spell will end and the drugs will revert to their normal state, even those in his system. There will be no way either through magic or Muggle science for anyone to know what I've done or how Vernon really died."

*"I'll know! There are laws against your kind harming us with magic! I'll find someone in your world and let them know what you did! "*

Lily shook her head. "No, Petunia, you won't. Because in a few seconds, I'm going to put you back to sleep and then erase your memories of this conversation."

Petunia was suddenly paralyzed in confusion. "But ... if you're going to take my memories, why did you even say all this to me in the first place?!"

Lily studied her sister in silence as if drinking in the sight of her. "Because you hurt my son, Petunia Dursley. And for the rest of my life, I will treasure the memory of the look on your face right now."

Petunia drew breath to scream, but before she could, Lily flicked her wand, and the Muggle fell back into her bed asleep. The witch moved over to the bed and placed her wand next to her sister's temple, casting an Obliviate to erase the last five minutes. Then, she picked up the pharmacology book and tucked it under her arm before vanishing the table and chair. Lily stopped at the door and took one last look at her sleeping sister before she turned the lights back off and left the house.



# A Very Potter Holiday

## CHAPTER 33: A Very Potter Holiday

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After the unpleasantness at the Leaky Cauldron, the rest of the holiday break was more subdued. Jim spent most of his time alone in his room, although Neville succeeded in coaxing Jim and Harry into flying with him on the morning of Christmas Eve. It quickly became apparent that Lily and James now had separate rooms, a fact of which Lady Augusta oddly approved.

"Every Lady should have her own rooms separate from the Lord's," she'd said sagely. "It keeps everyone from taking things too personally."

On the afternoon of the 24th, James invited Harry into his private office, where he spent three hours going over the family's assets with his Heir, including details concerning the Potter Charitable Trust. Much of it was over Harry's head, but he did come away with the definite impression that Pettigrew's offer of two-million galleons to step aside as Heir was small potatoes. He also did his best to absorb every detail with an eye towards sending Artie a pensieve memory as soon as he was back at school. When the two were done discussing the family business, Harry thought it was time to lead the conversation in the direction of other matters.

"Thanks for telling me all this ... Dad," Harry said with a smile. He'd been practicing his fake smile *a lot* since he knew he'd be spending the holidays with the Potters. And he was rewarded when James grinned warmly and almost affectionately at his use of the word "*dad*" no matter how

forced it might have been. "We still have some time before dinner. I was wondering..." He hesitated for what he thought was the right length of time to project bashful sincerity. "If you don't mind, could we talk a little about, well, *other* family matters."

James crooked his head. "Like what?"

"Well ... what was Hogwarts like for you when you were my age? How did you and ... Mum get together? What was it like during the War? That sort of thing."

James adopted a wistful expression. "Well, I hate to say it, but when I was your age – and for a few years after – I was a complete prat!"

Exercising incredible willpower, Harry made no comments about James's current personality. The man continued.

"I had three close friends: Peter, Remus ... and Sirius. We were inseparable. And we are all obnoxious arrogant little gits. '*Toe Rag*' was your mother's favorite name for me for pretty much our first five years in school together, and it wasn't a term of endearment. We called ourselves the Marauders and considered ourselves '*merry pranksters*.' A lot of other people would have described us as bullies, and it took me a long time to realize that they might have had a point. That's one reason why I'm so glad that you and Jim both count Neville as a friend. I didn't even start to grow out of that childishness until the end of Fifth Year when Frank Longbottom pretty much kicked my arse over a particular bit of school yard cruelty. Between that and some other things that happened the following year, I grew up, stopped with the pranking – mostly – and focused on getting my grades into shape. To my great amazement, my newfound maturity actually impressed Lily enough to the

point that she finally agreed to go out on a date with her. And when that date went well, we went on another ... and another. One thing led to another, and we got married right out of school."

"That seems... anticlimactic."

James shrugged. "Growing up frequently is."

Harry nodded as he took that in. "You say one of your Marauder friends was someone named Remus? Is that where my middle name came from? I'd assumed that Jim's middle name was Romulus and you called us that because we were twins."

James laughed. "No, no. Although if my mother had lived to see your birth, she'd have thought twin names like that would have been adorable. No, Remus Lupin was part of our little four-man band. He was both a very good friend and the brains of our quartet. Unfortunately, he suffered from a medical condition that made it impossible for him to serve as godfather to a child and especially one from an Ancient and Noble family, so we decided to honor him instead by naming both you and Jim after him. Your full wizarding name is Hadrian Remus Potter, Hadrian being the wizarding name of your great-great-grandfather who was Minister of Magic around the turn of the century."

"And Jim?"

"Iacomus Evan Potter. Iacomus is the Latin equivalent of James and is also the name of another of our prominent ancestors from the 15th century. Evan is a Welsh derivative of John, which was Remus's middle name, and it's also close to Lily's maiden name. Outside of official wizarding legal documents, Jim is just James Evan Potter, Jr. We only added the Junior for some weird social reason that I can't even

remember, but it doesn't have the same importance for wizards that it does for Muggles. You would never have had Junior after your name even though you were firstborn because generally it's considered socially improper for a wizard to name his Heir after himself."

James grimaced in annoyance. "Honestly, the whole thing was kind of a mess. You see, we weren't expecting twins. Neither Lily's family nor mine has a history of them, and while Healers can monitor the health of an unborn child, it's very difficult to magically determine gender or the presence of multiple fetuses. Something to do with how a magical baby, or babies in this case, growing inside a magical mother screws up diagnostic spells. You were *supposed* to be 'Harry James Potter.' We were prepared for the *possibility* of a 'Clementia Rose Potter' if you'd been a girl, but *not* for the possibility of *two boys*. We had to scramble to name you both because our family's Wizengamot charter has a bunch of stupid rules for the naming of Potter children and I didn't want to screw up anyone's inheritance rights by putting the wrong thing down on the official birth certificate. Your middle names could be anything Lily and I agreed on as long as you were named after a person we both considered important, but the first names *had* to be Latinized names associated with revered Potter ancestors."

Harry took a moment to be properly horrified at the thought of being a girl named "Clementia Rose."

"So what happened to Remus Lupin?" he asked. "I noticed that you referred to him in the past tense. Did he make it through the war?"

James hesitated, and it was clear that Harry had raised a sore subject. Not that he particularly cared, of course, but

Harry knew that James required a delicate touch, so he slipped on his best mask of guileless innocence.

"He did, but we ... quarreled after Jim vanquished You-Know-Who. In part, it was about you. Remus wanted to assume guardianship of you rather than see you sent off to live with Muggles, but his condition would have made that impossible. When Lily and I turned him down and sent you to the Dursleys instead, he ended up leaving Britain saying there was nothing left for him here. I haven't seen Remus in over ten years."

Harry nodded. "*And now comes the tricky part,*" he thought to himself.

"And Sirius Black? He was your friend for so long. Did you ever find out why he betrayed you?"

"No," James said flatly. "The fact that he did was enough. Once he was in custody, I chose not to dwell on it."

"Did he say anything about it at his trial?"

"I didn't go. You, Jim, and Lily were still at St. Mungo's at the time of Sirius's capture, and I refused to give him the satisfaction of thinking he was more important to me than my family. I'll admit I was shocked when I read in the papers how much time he'd spent as a secret Death Eater and how many crimes he'd committed and pinned on dupes he'd put under the Imperius Curse. Shocked and also embarrassed at how well he'd deceived me. After bringing him in, I never saw him again, and I've never regretted it."

Harry studied his father's face and the emotions playing across it. "*You learned that your best friend had betrayed you for years and almost got your whole family killed,*" he thought. "*And you weren't even interested in going to his*

*trial, let alone confronting him personally to hear what he had to say? Oh no, that's not the least bit weird and suspicious to me. Not one bit."*

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## **25 December 1992**

Early on Christmas morning, the Potter household awoke to celebrate Christmas. Gifts had been delivered the previous day, and after what had happened on Jim and Harry's birthday, each of them was exhaustively checked by the house elves for anything unusual or dangerous before they were left out under the tree for the three boys.

For the most part, Harry was pleased with his haul, though he was somewhat surprised to have received more Christmas gifts than the Boy-Who-Lived. Jim got gifts from Harry, Neville, Hermione, Padma Patil and collectively from the Quidditch team, while Harry got gifts from everyone in the study group, plus nearly every individual Slytherin on the Quidditch team or in his year. Indeed, among Second Year Slytherins, only Pansy and Vince had snubbed him. Even Greg had sent a box of sugar quills. Of course, Harry had not set out to treat the number of Christmas gifts the two boys received as a competition, but if he had, it was clear who the winner was. The most unusual gift was a book he'd received from Theo - ***Tales of Beedle the Bard***, which was book marked at "The Tale of the Three Brothers." What made it unusual was that Harry *also* received a different edition of *the same book* from Marcus Flint which was *also* book marked at the start of that same story.

Jim also received two books of his own, one each from Padma and Hermione. Padma's book was about the history and current status of Wizarding India, while Hermione's gift

was a copy of ***Hogwarts: A History***, though it was a much slimmer edition than the one Harry owned. Discreetly studying his brother's reactions, Harry noted the following details: that Jim initially seemed disappointed with Hermione's gift until he read the note accompanying it, that Jim then slid the note into a pocket with what passed for subtlety among Gryffindors before opening the book up to the contents page, and that Jim then immediately looked up sharply in James's direction before flushing slightly and then putting the book away.

*"Hmm," thought Harry. "So Hermione sent Jim a book with a transfigured cover, and he immediately hides it away from James. Fifty galleons says it's something about Parseltongue. Interesting. I wonder how hard it would be to get Jim to admit it to me and tell me the title without making him suspicious. Oh well, something else for the To Do list."*

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### ***That afternoon...***

After the noontime Christmas Dinner, Augusta, Neville, and Harry left Potter Manor via Floo for St. Mungo's to visit Neville's parents. At the Floo exit, they were met by Nymphadora Tonks and the scariest looking wizard Harry had ever seen, a burly, heavily scarred man with a whizzing electric-blue fake eye and a heavy wooden leg. Tonks introduced him as her supervising instructor, Alastor Moody. Neville recognized the man's name immediately and displayed an awestruck expression, while Augusta apparently knew him personally.

"Why Alastor, whatever brings you to St. Mungo's on Christmas Day?" she asked. "Is your eye out of focus again?"

The man gave a snort. "Scrimgeour has taken an interest in the health and safety of young Mr. Harry Potter here. While we don't have the authority to assign either an investigator or a bodyguard to Hogwarts – at least not yet – Trainee Tonks and I have been tasked with keeping an eye on the boy when he's out and about." Then, Moody's expression softened, if only a tiny bit. "Your ... *Christmas tradition* is widely known, Gussie. I thought it likely that Potter might choose to accompany you today. And so, here we are."

With that, his whizzing blue eye whirled about and trained itself on Neville. "Hello, Neville. I doubt you remember me, but I knew your parents quite well in their day and visited your home a few times when you were just a baby."

Neville nodded appreciatively. "Yes sir. Gran has shown me pictures of you with Mum and Dad from their days at the Auror Academy. And ... I've read all the stories about you in the Prophet." He turned to Harry. "Harry, this is Alastor Moody, one of the best aurors to serve in the last hundred years at least. They say half the dark wizards in Azkaban were put there by him. Auror Moody, this is my friend Harry Potter."

"Oh, I know who Harry Potter is, Neville," he said. "We were watching over you the other day at the Leaky Cauldron."

Harry's brow furrowed. "No offense, sir, but I think I'd have remembered you."

"Hmph. Tonks here is a Metamorphmagus, as I gather you know. She was the thin Norwegian-looking fellow sitting two tables over from you who kept complaining that the tavern didn't serve lutefisk." He glared at her with his good eye. "For which I lectured her sternly afterwards since it defeats the *whole purpose* of a disguise if you use one *that*



*draws attention to yourself!"* Tonks rolled her eyes while Moody looked back at Harry. "As for myself, let's just say that your father doesn't have the *only* invisibility cloak in Britain, just the fanciest one. If you plan to wander about Diagon Alley like some wide-eyed continental tourist when you have mysterious wizards plotting to kill you, you would be wise to pay more attention to your surroundings. That or invest in a Foe-Glass or a Sneakoscope. A *good* one, not the cheap copies they have in Diagon Alley. And always remember – CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Harry jumped at that as did several people in the waiting room, and the nearby receptionist (who bore a faint resemblance to the sour-faced Hogwarts librarian, Madame Pince) let out an angry "*Shush!*" to which Moody paid absolutely no heed. Augusta gave him a stern look.

"For Merlin's sake, Alastor! We're in a hospital! Stop ... pontificating!"

The auror sniffed disdainfully, apparently unmoved by the woman's complaint. Augusta shook her head and ushered the two boys past Moody and Tonks and towards the elevator. Not for the first time, Harry felt conflicted about accompanying the Longbottoms. He already felt as though he was intruding on the family's privacy, and now, by his very presence, he was attracting Ministry-sanctioned bodyguards.

Unfortunately, due to the nature of Harry's current legal status with the Potters, he couldn't stay at Potter Manor without a chaperone or it might lead to the dissolution of his injunction against James Potter and allow the man an unacceptable level of control over Harry's affairs. Besides, Alice Longbottom was supposed to have been Harry's godmother, and so he felt a fraternal obligation to

accompany Neville today. He remained silent as the group rode up the elevator to the Janus Thickey Long Term Care Ward where Neville's parents had been since he was a baby. Once inside the Longbottom's room (Moody and Tonks waited outside respectfully), Harry stayed back while Neville spoke to his parents, neither of whom seemed responsive. It was both sad and touching, particularly when Alice, her hands shaking from palsy, handed a candy wrapper to Neville who looked down at it and then quickly placed it into his pocket. For a brief moment, Harry had a flash of insight into some other world, one in which Neville had been the Boy-Who-Lived and where Harry had been sent to the Dursleys not because his parents thought him a squib but because they'd been left as empty shells after trying to protect their children from Death Eaters.

"Mum," Neville said gently. "This is Harry Potter. Lily Potter's eldest boy. Your godson." For a brief moment, Alice Longbottom turned her head as if to look in Harry's direction, although he could tell that she was looking over his shoulder rather than making any true eye contact.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Longbottom," he said respectfully. In that, she dipped her head a bit, though it seemed more of an involuntary response than any actual reaction to his words. The trio spent about thirty minutes in the Longbottoms' room in the Janus Thickey Ward. Harry and Augusta sat quietly while Neville told his mum and dad all the major events from his fall term at Hogwarts as he gently brushed his mother's hair.

After the visit was over, Moody and Tonks escorted the group back towards the lobby.

"So, Miss Tonks," said Augusta. "I see you have a stern taskmaster watching over you. Does this mean that you

won't be able to tutor my grandson and Harry this summer?"

"Um, no, Lady Augusta, sorry," Tonks replied. "I was going to write to Mr. Podmore at the start of the year once my schedule was confirmed, but it's looking like I'll be at the Academy all summer." Both boys looked disappointed at this.

"Oh well, that is a pity," Augusta continued. "I am pleased, however, to see that you are progressing so well through the Auror program. Mind you, I do hope that Alastor is instructing you in matters of ethics as well as tactics."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean, Gussie?" Moody said gruffly.

"You know as well as I do, Alastor, what it means to be a Metamorphmagus in today's climate. And I'm sure you know perfectly well what use Cornelius Fudge might have for someone with such a skill."

"The law is the law, Gussie," the Auror snapped irritably. "Metamorphmagi are covered under the Conscription Act, though I must *grudgingly* admit that Trainee Tonks is qualified to serve as an auror regardless of whether the Act applies to her."

"What's the Conscription Act?" Harry asked.

"A very old and obscure law of the Wizengamot," said Augusta. "One which requires wizards and witches who possess certain rare magical gifts, whether innately or acquired, to register them with the Ministry or risk imprisonment. Depending on the nature of the gifts in question, the person may also be compelled to act as an agent of the Ministry."

"In my case," said Tonks, "the Metamorphmagus gift is on the Conscription List, so when my powers manifested when I was a baby, my parents had to register me. I was always going to end up working in the Ministry in some capacity after that, but my grades plus my gift made me *qualified* for the Academy no matter how *grudging* some people are about it." She gave Moody an evil eye with that last remark. He grunted loudly in response.

"*Anyway*," he said to Augusta, "you will be pleased to know that, yes, Trainee Tonks and I have had several *long* talks about what she can and cannot legally do as an auror using her Metamorphmagus gift and what Ministry personnel, whether in or out of the DMLE, can and cannot ask of her. I've also had equally long talks with both Rufus and Amelia, and I don't think either of them will tolerate any shapeshifting funny business." He walked in silence for a moment. "Of course, whether *Potter* will tolerate any shapeshifting funny business remains to be seen."

Augusta looked sharply at Moody. "It is confirmed then? That James Potter will follow Rufus as head of the DMLE?"

"Pretty much, baring some sort of scandal. Cornelius seems to think James is the moon and the sun." Moody turned towards Harry. "Speaking of scandals, are *you* by any chance a Parselmouth like your brother?"

"No, I'm not," Harry lied effortlessly. "And I'll thank you not to summon a poisonous snake and throw it at me to try and prove otherwise. That got old very quickly during the last few weeks of term."

Moody studied Harry for a few seconds, his false eye whirling madly. Then, he gave a rasping laugh. "Fair

enough, boy. If you say you're not a Parselmouth, I guess I'll have to take you at your word. You certainly *seem* honest."

Harry frowned as he filtered his way through the layers of possible obfuscation in what Moody had just said. Suddenly, he was curious as to whether the grizzled auror might have been a Slytherin.

"Why are you so curious?" asked Augusta suspiciously. "Parseltongue isn't on the Conscription List."

"Not yet," he answered. "But it's been a long time since there have been any families known for producing Parselmouths who sit high enough in the Wizengamot to veto Parseltongue's reclassification. And with what's been happening with the Boy-Who-Lived, well, there's been *talk*."

Augusta frowned as she considered the implications of that, while Neville spoke up.

"But ... Lord Potter is Head of an Ancient and Noble House. You can't get any higher than that. Surely if it's possible for anyone to ... veto this ... whatever it is, he'd be able to do it."

"Able doesn't mean willing, lad," Moody replied. "People in this country deeply fear and mistrust Parselmouths. It's not fair, but that's the way it is. If he had to choose between Jim Potter getting drafted into government service – and most likely into James's own department – or vetoing the reclassification measure and letting people think he was shielding the Boy-Who-Spoke-Parseltongue from the law, perhaps even out of some dark motive," he turned towards Harry, "well, what do *you* think he'd do?"

Harry considered the question. "Honestly, I've no idea. I'm ... still getting to know James Potter."

Moody coughed loudly and then spat some phlegm into a nearby potted plant. "Yeah, good luck with *that*, kid. Personally, I know him well enough to take early retirement the day after he's confirmed as Chief Auror."

"Really, Alastor?" said Augusta in surprise. "You'd quit just over that?"

"Hell yes!" he exclaimed. "You and I both know I'm not pretty enough to be one of James Potter's aurors!"

He and Augusta both laughed, but Harry had a different question. "Just how many gifts are on this Conscription List right now? And how many people get drafted into working for the Ministry just for having them?"

"Oh, there are only a few gifts, Harry," said Tonks. "And they're all extremely rare. House Black used to be known for producing wizards and witches with various shapeshifting powers, but I'm the first one to display any of them in a hundred years or more.

"The first one to be *discovered*, my dear," said Augusta. "Your mother's family was insular and paranoid for a *reason* after all. And I've heard it suggested that Sirius Black was an unregistered Animagus..."

"More than suggested, Gussie," Moody interrupted. "James Potter was *oddly insistent* that Sirius Black's Azkaban cell have special anti-Animagus wards on it."

"*Really!*" she said, absorbing that bit of gossip. "How very interesting! Anyway Miss Tonks, I also seem to recall that when I was at Hogwarts, there were all sorts of unsavory rumors floating around your great-grandaunt Cassiopeia Black suggesting that she might have been an unregistered Metamorphmagus herself."

"Oh honestly, Gussie," said Moody acerbically. "She was a Black. They've *all* got unsavory rumors floating around them."

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**31 December 1992**

**7:00 p.m.**

The Potter New Year's Eve Ball lived up to its reputation with a guest list of nearly a hundred. At breakfast on Boxing Day, Lily casually mentioned that she had hired someone to come in and give Jim dancing lessons, and she asked if Harry and Neville would like to join in. Augusta answered with a firm "Yes" before either of them could respond, and all three boys showed varying degrees of mortification. Lily and Augusta also conspired to get in a fitting for formal robes for the boys.

On December 27th, all three boys met in the Grand Ballroom (a huge room half-again as large as the Great Hall at Hogwarts) where Lily and Augusta were waiting for them along with a positively ancient witch who was introduced as Madame Twanky of the "Twanky Academy for the Terpsichorean Arts." Madame Twanky did not personally teach the boys dancing lessons as such. Instead, she brought with her several mannequins which were charmed to move at her direction, which the boys found extraordinarily creepy and off-putting. After using the animated dummies to demonstrate the basic steps, she assigned one of the mannequins to each of the three boys and spent several hours teaching them the traditional waltz, the Viennese waltz, the pavane, the gavotte, the polka, and finally the foxtrot. Madame Twanky made it clear that she found the foxtrot common, bordering on vulgar, but she understood that "young people nowadays are into that sort of thing,"

On the evening of the Ball, Harry and Jim (both wearing brand new formal robes with green and red waistcoats, respectively) stationed themselves next to the Floo. It turned out that each of them had special guests upon whom they were waiting. The Greengrasses arrived first, and Harry welcomed the Noble family back to Potter Manor before escorting both Daphne and Astoria to the ballroom. Then, he returned just in time to see the Patils arrive ... and to watch as Jim kissed Padma Patil's hand. Slightly startled, Harry also extended his welcome to the Patils and quietly informed Mr. Patil that Lord Greengrass and Lady Augusta were already in the ballroom. Jim extended his arm to Padma who took it, to the quiet surprise of both Harry and Parvati. Recovering smoothly, however, Harry quickly offered his own arm to Parvati and escorted her to the ballroom, with Mr. and Mrs. Patil following behind.

A few minutes later, the Potter Twins were back once more at the Floo, awaiting more special guests. Apparently, James had pulled strings to arrange a one night only Floo connection between Potter Manor and the Granger residence. Hermione stepped through first, radiant in a periwinkle blue ball gown with long white Victorian opera gloves. Mr. and Mrs. Granger followed, each dressed in Victorian formal wear. Jim stepped forward first to kiss the hands of Hermione and then Mrs. Granger before shaking Mr. Granger's hand warmly. Harry watched Jim's interactions with Hermione's parents before following suit. The results of his observations were dispiriting. He'd held out hope that whatever curse caused Muggles to dislike him was common to both him and his brother. However, the Grangers seemed quite charmed by Jim (who, to be fair, *did* know how to conduct himself well in formal social situations). But when Harry stepped forward, both Muggles visibly recoiled from him. Though Hermione's parents both tried to maintain a sense of decorum, it was clear to Harry



that she'd noticed their reactions. Harry quickly finished his welcome and then left the Grangers to his brother while he returned to the ballroom to Astoria Greengrass to dance a waltz with him.

The two made small talk as they danced, though Tori still obviously had eyes for Cedric Diggory, who was dancing gracefully if nervously with some Ravenclaw named Chang whose parents both worked in the Ministry. After the waltz ended, Harry escorted Astoria back to her mother's side and then asked Daphne to dance a pavane with him. A slower, more regal dance, the pavane allowed the two to discuss more serious topics.

"Your home is lovely, Harry," Daphne said.

"Thank you, Daphne, though I'm still not sure I would call it *my home*. That part's a work in progress."

"Speaking of works in progress, I have news about your pet project involving my family. Father is telling Lady Augusta and Mr. Patil right now, but I wanted to let you know personally instead of hearing about it later."

"Oh?"

"There's been a ... complication. We think the Selwyns found out about our families' business negotiations and decided to intervene."

"With a carrot or a stick?"

"Carrot now, though probably with a stick if the carrot's not big enough. In a nutshell, Lord Selwyn set up a meeting with Father last week and made us an offer. If we'll break off our negotiations with the Longbottoms and Patils and sign an exclusive trade agreement with the House of

Selwyn, they'll sponsor our elevation to Ancient and Noble status."

The news was so startling to Harry that he briefly fell out of step with the music. "That's ... a pretty impressive offer. We must have scared the Selwyns even more than I'd thought." He took a deep breath. "Has your father accepted?"

"Not yet. He's not obligated to answer for several months." Daphne bit her lip slightly. "How much pull does your alliance have, Harry? We're assuming that the Selwyns will have the support of House Nott and House Malfoy and their respective vassals. Can the Longbottoms match that? And would your father support us? I mean, we're Slytherins from way back, but we never supported You-Know-Who."

"I'm sure Lady Augusta is counting votes as we speak." He hesitated. "I'll be honest with you. Vote allocation in the Wizengamot seems convoluted as heck and isn't something I've spent a lot of studying. I have been rather busy with other matters, I'm afraid. But I'll try to let you know something by the time we get back to school if Lady Augusta hasn't already contacted your father by then."

She nodded, and the two switched to small talk about school matters for the rest of the dance. As the song ended, Harry noticed Hermione standing with her back against a wall while sipping punch. And to his surprise, she was rather aggressively not looking at him in a decidedly Slytherin manner. In fact, when he took a step in her direction, she quickly finished her punch and made her way out of the ballroom. Smiling, Harry followed her out and down a hall and then saw her step into the Music Room. After looking around, he followed her inside and then put a privacy ward up over the door. When he turned around, Hermione was sitting on a bench in front of a grand piano.

Harry glanced around the room (and wondered for a second why on Earth the Potters kept a sousaphone lying around) before heading over to join her.

"Why Miss Granger! Wherever did you learn how to attract someone's attention by strategically ignoring them?"

She looked up at him with an amused expression. "From Blaise, of course. After your interaction with him at the birthday party last summer, I became interested in how Slytherins communicate with one another through body language and other nonverbal cues, so I cornered him and asked him for some pointers."

"You make us sound like some sort of alien species, Hermione." She crooked an eyebrow at him to suggest that she thought that exact thing about Slytherin House. He shook his head as he sat down next to her on the bench. After eighteen months as a Slytherin, he thought that it quite possible that she was right. "Never mind. Since you've been such an attentive student of Blaise's techniques, what do you want to talk about?"

"Oh, I was just curious, Harry Potter, as to what you could *possibly* have done to make my parents have such an obvious and uncharacteristic dislike for you?"

He coughed. "It's ... not something I can talk about. Not here anyway." He glanced around the room. "The walls have ears. Probably literal ears since it's a magical house."

She studied him for a moment before touching her wrist and then, with a flourish, pulling out her wand which had been ingeniously hidden inside the glove. "**MUFFLIATO.**"

"Ah yes. The privacy charm that you found in a stack of Gryffindor pornography. Did you ever turn that back in to

Professor Snape?"

"Yes, and don't change the subject. Professor Snape says this is the strongest privacy charm he's ever seen or heard of, so we should be able to talk freely."

He sighed and looked down at the floor. His Slytherin side calmly and somewhat coldly listed every reason why this was not the sort of thing he should reveal to Hermione Granger, the brilliant but reckless Gryffindor with the infuriatingly strong moral code and the absurd lack of restraint when someone presented her with a mystery. And *honestly*, she didn't know *the first thing* about protecting her mind from intrusion! But to each objection, his Gryffindor side had only one response – that she was his very first and very best friend and she would never betray him or let him down. And so he told her. Naturally, she was appalled.

"And you have no idea what's causing this ... psychosis in the affected Muggles?"

"None. Snape says its unprecedented, and if *he* doesn't know what's causing it, I can't imagine who *would*. All I know is that it makes Muggles dislike me and eventually want to see me suffer and die, but wizards aren't affected and can't even perceive whatever it is."

Hermione hesitated. "That's not *quite* true." Harry looked at her in surprise. "Luna Lovegood. We been studying her ... extrasensory power in Project Mysterioso."

"Extrasensory power? That's what we're calling it now when somebody sees imaginary creatures?"

"That's just it, Harry. I don't think they're imaginary anymore. By recording her own observations about your

brother, she was able to deduce that Jim was being psychically damaged by that dark Occlumency text weeks before anyone else discovered it."

Harry's widened slightly. "And she sees something in me?" he asked in surprise.

"Not exactly. She says she knows that there's something there inside you but that whatever it is, it knows when it's being observed and is able to actively conceal itself from her ... well, we don't have a name for what Luna does yet. Though she's very attached to the idea of calling it her '*Mysterioso Vision*.' That's what Professor Lockhart gets, I suppose, for trying to be witty and ironic."

Harry laughed at that before turning thoughtful. "So, I've told you one of my secrets. You tell me one of yours. What was that transfigured book you gave Jim as a Christmas gift? Something to do with Parseltongue?"

"If that were true, Harry, I doubt it would be of much interest to you. I mean, *you're not a Parselmouth, are you?*" And with that, she smiled and batted her eyelids almost mockingly. If he'd been drinking, Harry would have done a spit-take.

"*I am not a Parselmouth*" were the words he tried to say, but they kept tripping over "*first and best friend*." Finally, she took pity on him.

"Harry, speaking *purely hypothetically*, if you were a Parselmouth and kept it hidden even after Jim's exposure, would it be for legitimate and important reasons? Or would it be just to cruelly isolate Jim at Hogwarts and make him miserable?"

He took a deep breath and exhaled. "*Hypothetically*, it wouldn't *just* be to make him miserable. There would be legitimate and very important reasons as well."

"Pertaining to your Slytherin lineage, I suppose?"

That remark so startled Harry that he lost his balance and fell off the piano bench and onto the floor. Hermione laughed gently.

"What?!" he explained.

"Harry, honestly. I always thought it more likely for Jim, and presumably you, to have inherited Parseltongue as a family gift than for Jim to have gotten it from You-Know-Who as some sort of nonsensical magical transference. And since your mother was a Muggle-born, I assumed that the gift came by way of one of those Slytherin lines that was forced to change its name after the Inheritance Act was passed. From what I've read, no one knows *for sure* which families are descended from Slytherin, but the ones *thought* to be were generally rather awful, so I can see why you would want to control the circumstances under which you revealed any such magical heritage."

Harry climbed up and sat back down on the piano bench. "You're preceding under the assumption that all Muggle-born are actually lost descendants of magical lines, I take it?"

"Through squibs, yes. In our potions book last year, there was an essay written in the 19th century by Hector Dagworth-Granger, the founder of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers. Somewhat curious, I looked up his family tree and compared it to that of my father's side of the family. It appears that I am Hector Dagworth-Granger's

third cousin, twice removed. Or his second cousin, three times removed. I never can remember how that works."

"Have you contacted him?" Harry asked in surprise.

She sniffed as if she'd just detected a particularly foul odor. "Cousin Hector is deceased. I wrote to his daughter Cressida Dagworth-Granger last summer, and what a delightful charmer she was! Her response was a rather terse letter stating that the Dagworth-Granger family has never produced any squibs in its illustrious history, that she would not stand for any *Mudblood* besmirching her father's name and legacy, and that if I ever contacted her again she'd sue me for defamation."

"Oh, Hermione, I'm so sorry."

"It's alright, Harry. One day, I'll be invited to join the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers on my own merits. And I'll turn the bigoted Pure-Blood twits down flat!"

# A New Year Begins

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 34: A New Year Begins

***3 January 1993***

***The Hogwarts Express***

Blaise Zabini sat alone in his compartment aboard the Hogwarts Express reading a book while occasionally reaching into a bag of Bertie Botts' Every Flavour Beans and hoping he didn't pull out one that tasted of earwax. Harry and Neville were returning to Hogwarts via Floo, while Theo had remained there for Christmas. So among the Hogwarts Second Years who he actually considered friends, that left only...

"Ah Blaise!" said Hermione brightly as she stepped into the compartment with a flourish. "Here you are. I've been looking for ages."

"No you haven't," he replied without looking up from his book. "We left the station less than five minutes ago."

"Well, it felt like ages." She crooked her head to study the cover of Blaise's book. "Hmm. **Lords and Ladies** by Terry Pratchett. You *do* realize that that's a Muggle fantasy novel and not a primer on Wizengamot etiquette, right?"

He glanced up and favored the girl with what she might have considered a sneer if she hadn't understood the affection behind it. "Naturally, Hermione. The fact that I got it from Barnes & Noble in Manhattan was my first clue."



What? Can't a wizard show appreciation for a good Muggle book?"

"Not as a rule, no, though I'm please to see you are an exception." With that, she turned her back on him and erected a privacy charm.

"Really, Hermione? You're afraid that some Pureblood book critic will find out that I'm reading Terry Pratchett and cause problems? Surely Pureblood bigotry isn't *that* bad!"

She ignored Blaise's humor and sat down opposite him. "I want to talk about Harry's Parseltongue."

He snorted softly. "I think you mean Jim's Parseltongue. Harry doesn't talk to snakes, Hermione, he just wears them as insignia like the rest of our House."

"See, what's interesting, Blaise, is that your immediate response to a simple vague statement like '*I want to talk about Harry's Parseltongue*' is a categorical denial rather than just saying '*whatever do you mean, Hermione?*' You know, the way someone would respond if they had no idea that Harry was a Parselmouth. Very suggestive, that." Blaise frowned at her, but she continued before he could say anything. "But anyway, that's not important now. Whether Harry is a Parselmouth or not, he would never feel comfortable talking with me in part because he knows I'm not an Occlumens and anything he tells me might be gotten out of me with Legilimency. *So*, my font of all knowledge about Slytherin secret keeping, how do I become an Occlumens?"

He frowned even more deeply and set the latest book about Granny Weatherwax aside. "Hermione, becoming an Occlumens is potentially very dangerous. Harry and Jim are both trying to learn it because they've both learned secrets

they shouldn't have and don't want to be memory-wiped. Your ... *suspicions* about Harry being a Parselmouth – which probably half the school shares whether he is or not – are not a good reason for you to *rewire your brain!*"

"Really, Blaise? And what secrets did you have at the age of *eight* that led you to do that very thing?"

"Obviously," he said through gritted teeth, "I can't *tell you* because they're personal enough to protect with Occlumency."

"Of course not. Because I'm not an Occlumens and you couldn't trust me to keep your secrets."

"No, because they're *personal!*"

"All of them, Blaise? You don't have any secrets you *would* be willing to share with me if you knew my mind was protected?" He didn't answer. "Anyway, I've already had one Dark Lord rifling through my brain and I don't wish to repeat the experience whether I hold any of your or Harry's secrets or not. I do have my own secrets, you know."

He crooked an eyebrow at her.

"Well, *someday* I'll have secrets that I want to keep at all costs. Probably."

Blaise crooked his eyebrow even higher. She sighed in exasperation.

"Look, I want to do this. If you think Occlumency is something I should avoid despite its obvious value, make your case. You may not think much of Gryffindors in general, but you know I'm reasonable."

He laughed. "For *some* definitions of reasonable, I suppose." He took a deep breath and exhaled as he thought through the possible ramifications. Truth be told, Hermione was someone whose intelligence and rationality he respected, and it *would* be nice to be able to confide in her at least a few of the things he couldn't share with anyone else.

"Alright, here's the basics. Occlumency is the art of organizing and controlling your own mind. The basic art involves the ability to detect intrusive psychic attacks and defend against them. Those who study the art generally organize it into a seven-level tree, and at each level there are ancillary powers and effects that branch off from the basic defensive power to provide other benefits. A level one Occlumens gains a photographic memory. A level two can suppress his emotions no matter what the trigger. A level three can choose what emotions to feel in response to any situation and can also recognize when he's acting out of emotion rather than rationality. The powers get more esoteric after that. It's not actually necessary to rise above level one if all you want to do is keep a Legilimens from reading you – you can just practice the level one exercises for a long time until they're completely ingrained and that will keep out all but the most skilled Legilimens. But mastering the higher level secondary powers will cause your psychic shields to grow more quickly *if* you don't stumble into any of the pitfalls of the higher level powers. For example, level two lets you suppress your emotions, but you can misuse and abuse that power. Let's say you're deeply in love with someone who breaks your heart. You might make the spur-of-the-moment decision to simply never feel love again. And if you impulsively strip yourself of the ability to feel love, you will likely never turn that emotion back on again of your own free will. It would take a Mind Healer going in with Legilimency and performing

psychic surgery to reactivate those emotional connections. And it's like that with all the emotions. Turn off your fear response and you become insanely reckless. Turn off your anger response and you become robotic in your interactions with others. It really can be terribly dangerous, Hermione, which is why I'm very glad I had multiple tutors. You probably won't have access to such tutoring and will be on your own. You know, like *Jim* was when he almost let Rookwood's book turn him into a psychopath."

She nodded seriously. "But you will help me get started? I promise to be careful, and if you and Harry can help me find a tutor, I'll do whatever he or she says."

Blaise rubbed his forehead. "Alright. On your own head be it. Let me talk to Harry tonight, and I'll let you know what I've decided in a day or so."

She smiled eagerly.

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## ***Hogwarts***

### ***Late that afternoon ...***

Harry, Jim, and Neville stepped through the Floo back into the Headmaster's Office promptly at five o'clock, where Dumbledore was on hand to welcome them before sending them on their way to stash their luggage before the evening's feast.

"Oh, and Harry?" he called out just as the boys reached the door. "I am free to review your Occlumency shields this evening after dinner if that is acceptable."

"Yes sir," Harry replied. "I'm looking forward to it."

The Headmaster nodded. "Jim, Professor McGonagall will provide you with a weekly schedule for your Occlumency lessons with me."

Jim nodded with a smile, as he was looking forward to actual Occlumency tutoring instead of self-study (and particularly, self-study from a dark textbook). The three boys left the Headmaster's office, with Neville and Jim heading to Gryffindor Tower to put their luggage away. Happy to be away from the tension of Potter Manor, Jim's good mood lasted all the way to the second floor of the tower where their rooms were supposed to be. Then, he stopped suddenly on the landing in surprise. Where there had previously been a single door with a sign saying "Second Years," there were now two doors about fifteen feet apart. One had his and Neville's names on them while the others were for Dean, Seamus and Ron. Neville frowned and shook his head before walking past Jim into their new room. Once inside, it was clear that someone had simply rearranged the furniture and then conjured a large brick wall dividing the old dorm room in half before transfiguring a second door.

"Oh well," said Neville trying cheer the other boy up. "Look on the bright side. At least we won't have to listen to Ron snore all night."

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### ***Meanwhile in the Slytherin Dungeon***

Harry had just dropped his trunk off in his dorm room when Theo and Marcus both entered.

"Harry, do you have a minute to talk?" Theo said.

"Downstairs in ... the room?" Marcus simply stood behind Theo with his arms crossed.

"Of course," said Harry, intrigued by their demeanor. Minutes later, they were all three down in the Prince's Lair. Upon entering, Harry hissed a few words to the Hydra which to his disappointment still did not answer. He sighed and then turned to the other two.

"So, what's up?" he asked.

Theo and Marcus looked at one another. "First of all," the prefect began, "did you get our Christmas presents?"

"Two copies of **Beedle the Bard**? Yeah, I did. I have yet to figure out why it's so popular that each of you would send me one."

"Well," began Theo, "we didn't mean to each send you a copy. That was ... bad planning on our part. But that's not important now. Did you read the story that we both had bookmarked?"

"Yes. *The Tale of the Tree Brothers*. Very moving though a bit below my grade level. Now what's this about?"

"It's about Blaise Zabini," said Marcus abruptly. Harry stiffened his back.

"What about him?"

"Harry," Theo said quietly, "that day last term when you had the Occlumency seizure – how much do you remember about it?"

"Not much. I remember thinking that my Parseltongue was gone and then ... I dunno, everything went black."

"You had a seizure because your Occlumency shields buckled. And to help you restore them, Blaise used

Legilimency on you to forge a temporary psychic link so that he could support your shields with his own. And when you came back out of it, you asked Blaise about '*the Deathly Hallows*' before passing out. Do you remember any of that?"

"Um, not really. What's a Deathly Hallow?"

Marcus huffed in annoyance. "The magical items that Death gave the Three Brothers in the story, Potter! Try to keep up!"

"Sorry!" he replied somewhat indignantly. "I didn't grow up reading wizarding fairy tales. Now kindly get to the point."

"Harry," Theo said firmly. "There are a lot of wizards and witches who think the Deathly Hallows are real. Some of those wizards and witches have ... weird ideas about the Deathly Hallows. And a few have *extremely* weird ideas about them."

"What sort of ideas?" Harry replied in a cautious tone.

"Depends on which weirdo you're talking to," said Flint. "Worst case scenario? *Grindelwald* was big on finding and mastering the Deathly Hallows." With that, he whipped out his wand and began drawing flaming marks in the air. A triangle, then a circle, then a vertical line.

"These marks make up the Sign of the Deathly Hallows. Sometimes, they're arranged differently. Maybe the triangle is outside the circle or inside it or maybe the line is horizontal instead of vertical. But it's always a line for the Elder Wand, a circle for the Resurrection Stone, and a triangle for the Cloak of Death." Marcus flicked his wand, and the three symbols merged with the triangle on the outside and the line bisecting the circle from top to bottom.

"*This* arrangement was the insignia of Grindelwald's armies."

Harry nodded. "Noted. So when do we get to the part where this is relevant to *me*?"

Theo frowned. "Man, Christmas at the Potters has made you *cranky*! It's relevant because you're the Potter Heir, and if you stay the Potter Heir, you will eventually inherit, among other things, a certain invisibility cloak that is the only such cloak I know of that's lasted more than a century without losing its enchantments. In fact, according to *some* stories, that same invisibility cloak has been in your family since the founding of the Wizengamot if not longer, whereas the typical invisibility cloak available for sale today will wear out after a decade or two at most."

Harry stood open-mouthed for several seconds. "You think the Potter Cloak – the one that my idiot father gave to my idiot brother so that he could use it for *pranks*, and that my idiot brother subsequently allowed to be *stolen* – is the legendary Cloak of Death?!"

Theo and Marcus looked to one another, before Marcus spoke. "Let's just say it's *a possibility*, especially since it kinda widens up the list of suspects for who might have stolen the Cloak from Junior if it's, you know, an *object of worship* for some people. And let's also say that Theo and I are ... concerned about how Blaise Zabini abruptly decided to glom onto you back when you were a firstie now that we know the Hallows are something he seems to think about a lot and especially connection with you. It's potentially ... sinister."

Before Harry could respond to Flint's odd conspiracy theory, the door to the Lair began to open. Marcus dispelled



the flaming symbols he'd created just as Blaise Zabini himself stepped through. He stopped suddenly as the other three boys stared at him.

"Am I late for a meeting?" he asked coolly.

"Not at all," Harry said. "We were just comparing notes on what we each got for Christmas. How was *your* holiday?"

Blaise smiled. "Magical, Harry. Absolutely magical."

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### ***Near the Great Hall Just before dinner***

"*Pssst!*"

Amaryllis Wilkes looked around sharply at the sound until she noticed Jim Potter partially hidden behind a suit of armor. She looked around to make sure no one was watching before moving over to the nervous boy.

"What is it, Potter?" she asked warily.

Jim looked around as well and swallowed. "I, um... Listen, after what happened before the break, I ... I just wanted to say thanks... Again. And also, I wanted to give you this." He held out a small box wrapped in silver foil to the girl. "It's nothing much. Just a token of appreciation for how you helped me. And also a late 'Merry Christmas' I guess."

She gave the boy a dubious look and then carefully took the box and unwrapped it. Her eyes widened. It was a box of very fine chocolates from Honeydukes.

"Wow. Thanks, Potter. That was ... very thoughtful of you."

"You're welcome, Wilkes." The two looked at each other nervously, as if neither knew what to say next. Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately), they were saved from making small talk by the arrival of someone else.

"Potter?!" exclaimed Cormac McLaggen. "You're hanging out with Junior Death Eaters now?!"

With McLaggen were several other Third and Fourth Year Gryffindors. Jim studied them, wondering with a mixture of fear and anger whether any of them were one of the pair that had jumped him before Christmas. Behind them, he also noticed Ron and several younger Gryffs holding back and watching.

"Who I hang out with is none of your concern, McLaggen," Jim said coldly while moving to position himself between Wilkes and his fellow Gryffindors.

McLaggen took a step forward. "I think it *is* our concern if we've got the Heir of Slytherin lurking in our house *and* he's consorting with the Toymaker's daughter!"

Several students gasped at the accusation. Jim's hand inched towards his wand, while McLaggen and his cronies bowed up aggressively. But before the spells could start to fly, another voice cried out.

"That's *quite* enough!" said Miranda Bonneville, the Sixth Year Slytherin prefect as she stepped around a corner. Behind her were Cassius Warrington and the two Slytherin Beaters. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you fine upstanding Gryffindors that there's to be no fighting in the corridors. Supper is awaiting. *Run along!*"

McLaggen and the other Gryffindors glared back and forth between Miranda and Jim before departing for the Great

Hall. Ron was the last to go. Oddly, he didn't look as angry towards Jim as the older Gryffinors, but there was a coldness to his expression that made Jim shiver a bit. He left without a word.

"Everything okay, Potter? Wilkes?"

"We're fine," mumbled the shaken boy as he watched his former friends stalk off without him.

Miranda moved closer to Potter and Wilkes and spoke quietly but firmly. "Potter, on behalf of Slytherin House, I thank you for being so protective of Miss Wilkes."

"It was nothing," Jim said blushing slightly.

"I disagree. Given Miss Wilkes's background, I don't think it should surprise you to know that she's been the victim of a great deal of unpleasantness since the school year started. Pranks. Hexes. Insults. The occasional threat of physical harm."

Jim stiffened and turned to look back at Amy, who looked away in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry to say," Miranda continued, "that much of this abuse has come from your House. So I assure you that it means a great deal for someone of your stature to be so tolerant and protective of her. Again, you have the gratitude of House Slytherin."

The boy nodded almost dumbly. *"The gratitude of House Slytherin,"* he thought. *"That's something I never thought I'd hear ... or for that matter see any value in receiving!"*

With that Cassius Warrington stepped forward. "Mr. Potter, I don't think we've ever been formally introduced. I am

Cassius Warrington. I believe you already know Peregrine Derrick and Lucien Bole from the Quidditch Team. From what I just saw, I am concerned that you yourself might be suffering from some level of threat from your own House. I know that you are quite skilled at Defense, but if you're interested, we and some of our friends have a small informal Defense study group. Currently, it's only five Slytherins and four Ravenclaws. We've never invited a Gryffindor before ... and honestly, never thought one would accept if we did invite him. But if you don't feel safe among the Gryffindors, you are more than welcome to join us for advanced Defense training. Several of our members are Newts-level Defense students and are on the Auror Academy career track. I think you could learn a lot with us."

Jim swallowed. "*Yeah, I bet I could. But what exactly would I be learning in a Slytherin Defense class?!*" After a second, he gave a weak smile. "Your offer is very generous and kind, Mr. Warrington. I'll consider it carefully."

Warrington smiled. "I hope you do, Mr. Potter. Despite the differences in our Houses, I think you'll find that we have much to offer you."

With that, the Slytherins all nodded respectfully to the Boy-Who-Lived (who thought this was among the most surreal experiences of his life) before heading on to supper with Amy Wilkes in tow.

After they left, Jim exhaled and shook his head. "*At this rate, I'll get that Howler from Dad I've been expecting before the week is out!*"

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***The Headmaster's Office***  
***9:00 p.m.***

After supper, Harry made his way to the Headmaster's Office, where he spent the better part of an hour staring into Albus Dumbledore's twinkling eyes while fending off his Legilimency attacks. Finally, the old man called it a night.

"My congratulations, Harry. Your skills are remarkably impressive for someone of your age. I am not entirely certain that you could block Voldemort himself for any extended length of time, but to be honest, if you came under his hand, it is likely that no amount of Occlumency could hold him at bay. It is for that reason that I must also ask you to take a secrecy vow which will make it impossible to coerce the secret from you and also prevent you from intentionally or unintentionally revealing the secret."

Harry cocked his head. "Does this mean you don't trust me, Headmaster?" Dumbledore started to respond when Harry laughed. "It's alright, sir. To be honest, I'd have been concerned if you'd been willing to just tell a twelve-year-old the secret without any additional precautions. What sort of oath do you propose?"

Secrecy oaths, of course, are not as stringent as Unbreakable Vows in that they don't impose a death sentence on violators. Harry himself was quite familiar with secrecy oaths having already sworn a few already. By swearing an oath never to reveal a particular fact to anyone who didn't already know it, the oathtaker actually devotes a portion of his own magic to preserving the secret. The oath's most basic function is to prevent the oathtaker from accidentally revealing the secret. If he gets too loose-lipped, the oath will nudge him and remind him of what he promised. If he's drugged or becomes intoxicated, then he will stop talking altogether rather than drunkenly reveal the truth. He will likewise become physically unable to speak about the secret when under the effects of

Veritaserum or physical torture, and while the oath will not shield against Legilimency, its effects can augment the oathtaker's ability to resist having his mind read, even more so if he is also an Occlumens. The most powerful secrecy oaths provide even greater protections – the oathtaker will feel a strong intuitive reluctance to discuss the secret with someone who he *thinks* knows it but who actually does not (including imposters) or even when there are hidden eavesdroppers nearby who might overhear. Finally, the oathtaker *can* intentionally reveal the secret, but doing so will cause Magic itself to permanently brand him in some way, usually with a permanent disfigurement that mark him forever as an oathbreaker. In Britain, wizarding law forbids wizards and witches branded as oathbreakers from testifying in court cases, from entering into contracts that are not magically enforced, and even from some areas of employment for which trustworthiness is deemed paramount.

Harry furrowed his brow as he absorbed Dumbledore's explanation of how secrecy oaths applied in their situation. "Did they make Sirius Black swear a secrecy oath?" he asked abruptly.

"A very astute question, Harry. The answer is no. There is a necessary design flaw in the Fidelius Charm which ensures that no other type of secrecy oath could bind the Secret Keeper in any way. The spell makes it impossible for anyone to learn the secret by any means other than intentional revelation, including direct observation of the truth, and it also erases knowledge of the secret from people who knew it before the spell was cast. But Magic always demands a price for effects of such a global impact, and with the Fidelius, the price is that you must put absolute faith in the person you choose to keep the secret."

Harry nodded and swore the oath Dumbledore demanded. The boy saw the benefits of the oath, and anyway how could he complain? According to Dumbledore, Jim himself had been made to swear the same oath once his parents found out he knew the Prophecy in order to reduce the chance of him accidentally revealing it, and Peter Pettigrew had sworn an even more stringent Unbreakable Vow. When the oath was complete, Dumbledore rose and went to a cabinet from which he produced a pensieve and a small vial. Minutes later, the two emerged from Dumbledore's memory of Sybil Trelawney's ill-fated job interview. It was illuminating to Harry in many ways. For one thing, he'd never imagined that a True Seer could deliver a Prophecy despite being visibly intoxicated. Harry thought through the words of the Prophecy.

*"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."* He looked up at the Headmaster. "How *did* James and Lily Potter defy the Dark Lord three times?"

"That was indeed one of the more vexing questions raised by the Prophecy. After all, what level of oppositions counts as '*defiance*' for purposes of satisfying a prophecy? You know, I initially suspected that Neville Longbottom was more likely to be the Prophecy Child rather than your brother or you. Neville was a Pureblood, after all, which I'd have assumed someone like Voldemort would more likely consider a threat. But more importantly, Neville's parents were also both Aurors who had fought against Voldemort's forces repeatedly prior to their deaths, and each of them had killed several high-ranking Death Eaters in the course of their duties. Alice Longbottom was six months pregnant when she ended the life of Boruslav Lestrage, the father of Rabastan and Rodolphus and father-in-law to Bellatrix

Black-Lestrange. As for your parents? Well, James was both an auror and a Lord of the Wizengamot, even as young as he was back then, and in both arenas, he had challenged Voldemort many times in ways that might constitute defiance. But your mother? Well, she wrote a very famous and much-admired Letter to the Editor of the Daily Prophet in which she denounced the Death Eaters and Voldemort and encouraged her fellow Muggleborns to take up arms and stand with the government against the forces of bigotry. She also fought Bellatrix Lestrange to a standstill in a duel in Diagon Alley during the December prior to your birth. But as for a third defiance, I've never been sure what it might have been. I finally concluded that it must have been her decision to marry a Pureblood like James despite the social stigma, but frankly, I've always found that ... unsatisfactory."

Harry considered that before continuing with the Prophecy. "*And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not.*" I assume the mark is the V-scar on Jim's forehead. Do we have any idea what the mysterious power is?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I am somewhat embarrassed to say that my best theory to date has been ... *love*."

Harry coughed. "... love, sir?"

"I admit it's not a well-reasoned theory. But I've never been able to detect anything magically unusual about Jim that's not explained simply by the fact that he's growing up to become a powerful wizard, though to be honest, he's no more powerful for his age than either you or Neville or even some of your peers such as Draco Malfoy or Hermione Granger. True, he somehow immolated the body of Quirinus Quirrell last May and so was able to drive Voldemort's



shade away, but *how* he was able to do so remains a mystery. So instead, I've tried to work backwards from the other part of that phrase. What could the power be that Voldemort *knows not*? His occult knowledge is vast, and I am not ashamed to say that his knowledge of the Dark Arts exceeds my own. But from his actions and conduct, it seemed clear that Voldemort suffers from profound psychosis, and he has continually exhibited overtly sadistic behavior, especially towards his own followers. During the war, he was notorious for inflicting the Cruciatus Curse as punishment for even the mildest transgressions. So I began to wonder if his apparent inability to experience or understand the emotion of love might represent the power he knows not."

"... love," Harry said again, still somewhat dubiously. Dumbledore sighed.

"While a weak theory, Harry, I assure you that it's not as far-fetched as you might think. Believe it or not, there is in fact a standing research group that has been in place for centuries within the Department of Mysteries that is devoted to studying the supernatural implications of love. There are a number of obscure esoteric spells that can only be cast by a wizard who possesses strong feelings of love for another. I understand you are presently studying the Patronus Charm, and for most wizards who can perform that spell, the happy memory which fuels it generally pertains to one's loved ones. Similarly, there are many dark spells which can only be cast by one who does not feel love or, worse, is willing to sacrifice the object of his true love for the sake of power."

Harry absorbed all that. The Headmaster was right, of course. While it offended Harry's cynicism, "*love*" was

certainly as plausible as anything he could come up with. He decided to move on to the next part of the Prophecy.

*"And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."* He frowned. "Does that mean that literally no one can kill either Jim or Voldemort except the other? That they're both effectively immortal until one of them kills the other?"

"Yes and no. I believe that whatever mechanism Voldemort used to achieve functional immortality is one that only the Child of Prophecy can overcome. However, I do not think that the reverse is true. Jim, despite his being recognized as the Boy-Who-Lived, is only the most obvious candidate to fulfill the Prophecy. If he were to die at the hands of Voldemort or anyone else, the Prophecy would eventually reorient itself towards another viable candidate."

Harry swallowed. "Me. Or Neville, I suppose."

"Correct, my boy. Though I suspect that your metaphysical proximity to Jim makes you the stronger candidate, which is why I was willing to reveal all this to you. We already know that Voldemort believes your parents to have defied him three times. And I suppose, in a pinch, Fate might consider the scar you received from the blast of Voldemort's bodily destruction to be him 'marking' you, albeit in a roundabout way."

The boy was silent for a moment. Then, he shook it off and focused back on the last of the Prophecy.

*"Neither can live while the other survives."* That's an ... odd way of phrasing it, don't you think? Is there a difference between living and surviving that Fate would consider important?"

Dumbledore grinned rather broadly at that. "*Very good*, Harry. A very insightful question and one that I've grappled with for years. The answer is ... I've no idea. What I know of Divination tells me that every word is important, even if its import cannot be immediately understood. I am convinced that the very distinction you've drawn – living versus merely surviving – is important to fully understanding the rest of the Prophecy. Alas, I am no closer to understanding that distinction than I was when I first heard the Prophecy in 1980. After all, Voldemort survived for over a decade, during which time Jim enjoyed a life of considerable prosperity and comfort."

A barely perceptible wince flashed across Harry's face. Dumbledore noticed the reaction and suddenly realized what he'd just said. He deflated slightly. "A life that you were denied, Harry. I've said it before, but ... it cannot be said enough. For my role in wrongly declaring you a squib thereby leading you to your placement with the Dursleys, I humbly apologize."

"It's alright, sir. It's ... it's the past, and I'm not much for brooding. I know your intentions were good and that it wasn't your fault I was left there unattended. You have no cause to apologize to me."

From his perch nearby, Fawkes let out a soothing trill that lifted the spirits of Harry and Dumbledore both.

"That reminds me, Headmaster. You never did tell me who was the third person who got a wand with one of Fawkes's feathers."

"Didn't I? Oh yes, I remember our earlier conversation now. It was a brilliant young man who overcame a tragic upbringing to become one of our very best students. He

was sorted into Slytherin in 1938 and rose to become Head Boy. His name was Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Tom Marvolo Riddle had a wand that was brother to mine and Jim's?"

The Headmaster was surprised at Harry's response. "You know the name, Harry?"

"Er, yes sir. After what happened last Halloween, the members of my study group were curious about that whole '*Heir of Slytherin*' business and did some research. His name came up. I gather he got a Special Services Award over it. I did think it odd, however, that no one seems to have heard much of him after his graduation."

Dumbledore shook his head almost fondly. "Indeed. *Tom Marvolo Riddle*. A name I haven't thought of in a very long time." He glanced up at the clock on the wall. "It's getting rather late, Harry, and you don't have much time before curfew. Let me escort you back to the entrance to the dungeons, and along the way, I'll tell you what I remember about the young Mr. Riddle."

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### ***Meanwhile in the Slytherin Dungeon...***

Amy entered the dungeon with her bookbag over her shoulder. She'd spent a few hours studying alone in the Library while she thought about what had happened earlier with Jim Potter. As she crossed the Common Room, she noticed Ginny Weasley sitting on a divan chatting with Astoria Greengrass. Ginny looked up towards her as she passed, but Amy spared her a glance and no more. Instead, she made her way down a side corridor to the study where Warrington held court over his circle of Pureblood friends. She entered and closed the door behind her.

"Well, that went reasonably well. Although I think you overplayed it by inviting Potter to the Slytherin Dueling Society. We've got a ways to go before he'll be remotely comfortable in a room full of Slytherins shooting off hexes at him."

Warrington sniggered. "He'll come around. You just keep working on him."

"It might be helpful if I actually knew what your plans for him were. It's not like he can get resorted into Slytherin even if he does have dark tendencies."

"You just leave the planning to us, Wilkes. Your job is to give the Golden Hero someone towards whom he can feel protective. You lead him to us and we'll do the rest."

"The rest of *what*? You think you can turn Jim Potter into a Dark Lord and then, what, ride his coattails to glory?"

Warrington and the other Slytherins stiffened at that. "You forget who you're talking to, Wilkes," snapped Miranda Bonneville. "Just as you've forgotten that *you came to us* to ask for protection for yourself." Miranda smirked. "Not to mention your little *blood traitor friend*."

Amaryllis' face hardened. She lifted her chin and took a step forward, her eyes flashing dangerously. "No, *Miranda*, I think it's all of *you* lot who have forgotten who you're talking to! You with your schemes about turning Jim Potter dark. Warrington, Bonneville, Derrick, and Bole. All of you so proud of your mighty Pureblood families. *Don't make me laugh!* You forget that my father sat at *Voldemort's* right hand!" The other Slytherins all gasped at her use of the forbidden name. "That my mother *chose* to die in Azkaban rather than betray the Dark Lord! And all while *your* families were as gray as last year's underpants!"

All of your families so eager to whisper your support for the Death Eaters but not a Dark Mark to be found on any of them."

Wilkes took a second to regain her composure while the older Slytherins looked at one another nervously. Then, Amaryllis continued more calmly.

"As for Ginny Weasley, I am seeking protection for that little *blood traitor* for one reason and one reason only – because if anything bad happens to the Weaslette while I'm *sharing a dorm room with her*, I'll catch the blame for it. I need her and her miserable blood traitor family's golden reputation to rehabilitate the Wilkes name until I can marry well, have a child, and finally gain access to the birthright that would have been mine years ago if I'd only been a boy instead of a girl. Only then will Arthur Weasley's miserable brood get what's coming to them!"

She stepped back and crossed her arms defiantly. "So, do we have an understanding?"

Warrington licked his lips. "We ... do, Wilkes. On Miranda's behalf, I apologize for our lack of appreciation for your efforts ... as well as for your family's noble service to the cause. Please, pull up a chair. Now that you've proven yourself, not to mention explained satisfactorily your protective interest in the Weasley girl, we can tell you a bit more about what we hope to accomplish."

Amy nodded, pulled out a chair, and sat down, no longer an agent of Cassius Warrington's Pureblood conspiracy, but a full member.

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***Soon after in the hallways of Hogwarts...***

"When I first met Tom Riddle in 1937," said Dumbledore as he led the boy on a leisurely walk through the darkened school, "he was an eleven-year-old London orphan. It was the eve of World War II, and he was an inmate at Wool's Orphanage, his mother having died there giving birth to him on New Year's Eve of 1926. To be honest, my first impression of Tom was rather negative. I was Deputy Headmaster at the time, and it was my job to deliver his Hogwarts letter and explain to him the nature of magic and of this school. He was quite traumatized by his upbringing, and he admitted a past history of stealing from other orphans. He implied that he had even hurt some of them deliberately with magic, although he maintained it was self-defense. At the time, I was quite concerned about whether the boy would fit in here."

"What changed?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. "You and he had something in common: a great appreciation for the value of both learning and advanced preparation. The school provided a small stipend for charity cases such as Tom's, and after purchasing all of his school books and supplies, there was enough left over to pay for several books about wizarding culture and etiquette. The boy who arrived on the Hogwarts Express was far more sophisticated and cultured than the sullen angry lad I'd met weeks before, much as your own immersive study of culture and etiquette gave you an edge when you first arrived here. Of course, etiquette and intellect alone would not have enabled him to succeed as a Slytherin, but Tom had a third advantage that he parlayed into tolerance from Slytherin House, if not exactly open-armed acceptance. An advantage that he shared with your brother, Jim. Can you guess what it was?"

Harry shrugged. "Was he a Quidditch star?"

The Headmaster laughed. "I don't know that Tom ever touched a broom after his First Year. No, I refer to the fact that Tom Riddle was a *Parselmouth*."

The boy's head jerked around in surprise. "A Parselmouth?! But he was Muggleborn, wasn't he? And how did a Parselmouth ever be accepted enough to become Head Boy?"

"Oh in those days, Harry, Parseltongue was a disfavored skill to be sure, but it was not yet something that provoked unreasoning fear in wizards and witches. *That* only happened after Voldemort's rise to power. He was known for aggressively using Parseltongue as a tool for terrorism, such as by summoning entire generations of poisonous snakes and sending them en masse against his enemies. When Tom was here, Parseltongue was disfavored because it implied descent from Salazar Slytherin, but that was all. In fact, Tom's Parseltongue was apparently what eventually allowed him to discover his true heritage. His father was a Muggle, but his mother was Merope Gaunt, one of the last members of the Ancient and Noble House of Gaunt, a House known for carrying the Parseltongue inheritance."

Harry thought about the name. He recognized Gaunt as being descended from Slytherin according to Salazar's tapestry, but he certainly didn't recall it as an Ancient and Noble House. "Is House Gaunt extinct?"

"Yes. It was a patrilineal house with very stringent limitations on acceptable marital partners. Merope Gaunt was excluded from inheritance because of her gender, and even if she hadn't been, Tom would have been excluded for having a Muggle father. The last males who were eligible to serve as Lord Gaunt died during the 1940's, and the Wizengamot acknowledged line extinction soon after. I



vaguely recall that there was some scandal in the Wizengamot involving Toms's grandfather from back in the 1920's. I also seem to recall Horace Slughorn mentioning that when Tom returned to school for his Sixth Year, he was wearing the Gaunt Lord's Ring, but it had no political significance by that point."

"Were you not there at the time, Headmaster?"

"No," the old man said with a grim expression. "In the summer of 1943, I took sabbatical to join the British Wizarding Expeditionary Force against Grindelwald in Germany. I didn't return until fall of 1945, by which time Tom had graduated. I wouldn't see Tom Riddle again until many years later."

"What happened to him?"

"A good question. Despite his remarkable NEWTs scores, Tom never sought a job with the Ministry or even with any private concerns. To my surprise, he got a job working in a highly disreputable antiques store in Knockturn Alley. Then, he simply disappeared. For years, I assumed he'd emigrated. So many of our more talented Muggleborns and Half-Bloods do, after all. But then, in 1957, Tom showed up out of the blue to apply for the position of Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts here at Hogwarts. I turned him down and he left. I never saw him again after that."

"Why did you turn him down for the job? It seems like he'd have been a natural at it."

Dumbledore stopped, and a look of mild confusion slipped over his face. "You know, Harry, now that you mention it, it is the *oddest thing*. I remember interviewing Tom for the job. I remember thinking he would be exceptionally qualified. And I remember thinking very firmly that he

should *not* be hired." The Headmaster looked down at Harry. "But for the life of me, I *can't remember why*."

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### ***The Slytherin Dungeon, 1 st Year Girls' Dorm***

When Amy finally entered her dorm room, Astoria and Drusilla weren't in yet, but Ginny Weasley was sitting on her bed as if waiting patiently. As Amy closed the door, Ginny stood and walked over to her with her arms crossed. Her expression was cool.

"So, *Death Eater*, are you done selling me out to Warrington and all his Pureblood friends for the night?"

Amy sneered at her. "Yeah, *blood traitor*. For tonight, anyway."

The two glared at each other for a moment ... before each of them burst into giggles.

"See, I *told you* it would work," said Ginny.

"I *know*. But I still can't believe that Cassius Warrington *at the age of fourteen* thinks he's some sort of evil mastermind!"

"Now then," said Ginny eagerly, "before Dru gets back from the loo, tell me *everything* that happened!"

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### ***Elsewhere in the castle ...***

"So you left to fight Grindelwald right after the year the Chamber of Secrets was opened," Harry inquired.

Dumbledore looked down at Harry in surprise. "You are remarkably well-informed, Mr. Potter."

"I'm told I have an appreciation for both learning and advanced preparation. When somebody petrifies a cat and leaves a note about 'the Heir of Slytherin,' I take an interest."

"Indeed. Alas, I have few answers about the Chamber of Secrets affair. We never found the Chamber, if it in fact exists. We never discovered who the Heir of Slytherin was, though poor Hagrid was falsely accused of the crimes. We never even found out how the victims were petrified, whether by spell or by some sort of creature. There were, of course, tales about Slytherin's Monster, but that may have been misdirection."

"Well, what did the petrified students say when they were, um, depetrified? Unpetrified?"

"I believe '*unpetrified*' is the proper English word, though I think it's more clinically proper merely to say '*revived*.' And to answer your question, they had very little to say at all. Whatever effect caused the petrification also instilled a short term amnesia. None of the surviving victims upon revival could remember anything which happened within a minute or so prior to their petrifications except a strong recollection of '*big yellow eyes*,' which again points to some sort of creature, but not conclusively."

"Moaning Myrtle said something about '*big yellow eyes*.' Which reminds me: Why do you think she was killed instead of just petrified?"

"To be honest, I believe that her death was unintentional. She was actually petrified like the other victims but was in motion at the time, perhaps trying to run from her attacker."

From the positioning of her body, it appears that she was petrified and immediately tipped over, and as she fell, her temple struck the hard corner of a wash basin at just the right angle to kill her. It is telling, I believe, that there were no further attacks after her death. I believe the assailant feared that Myrtle's death would bring about an auror's investigation, and even an accidental killing would provoke a far harsher legal punishment than mere petrifications."

"How were the students ... revived?"

"Mandrake Restorative Draught. An extremely difficult to produce potion, seeing as it calls for prodigious quantities of an incredibly rare, expensive and difficult to raise plant. Hogwarts is the only place it's grown in Britain, and one of the few in Europe. One of the many potent potables that can be prepared using fully-matured Mandrake root is a restorative potion that can cancel out any transfigurative effect on the imbiber, including petrification."

"I'm guessing we don't have any on hand, since Mrs. Norris is still petrified over two months later."

"The Mandrakes being grown in the Greenhouse won't be fully matured for months to come," Dumbledore replied.

"Actually, though, we do have a very small quantity of Mandrake extract provided by Professor Lockhart. We have held it in reserve in case the mysterious Heir of Slytherin were to attack a student. But as you say, it's been two months and there have been no further incidents, so I think it should be safe now to..."

As they turned a corner, Dumbledore froze, the words dying on his lips. He reached out with a firm hand and pushed Harry behind him while pulling out his wand with the other hand. For his part, Harry gasped in surprise and once more

paid respects to Blaise's Gods of Irony, who obviously must have been listening to Dumbledore talk. For sure enough, the Heir of Slytherin had struck again. In the hallway up ahead lay the petrified body of Cormac McLaggen, his frozen face in a rictus of fear. And on the wall above him, written in what might well be blood, was a message for the entire school.

***Behold the Fate That Awaits You  
Enemies of the Heir of Slytherin***

### Chapter End Notes

AN 1: "Neither can live while the other survives" has never made much sense to me. My fanon explanation is as follows: "Living" within the meaning of the Prophecy means "having friends, experiencing happiness, and being able to pursue one's life goals," while "surviving" means "not dying." Voldemort endured as a shade, but so long as he did survive, it was necessary to hide canon-Harry away at the Dursleys. At the same time, Harry was trapped at the Dursleys where he experienced survival rather than life, but while he was hidden away, Voldemort couldn't get at him and use Harry to resurrect himself. It is telling then that when Harry comes to Hogwarts and finally experiences some true happiness, it coincides with Voldemort returning and aggressively pursuing his agenda once more after a decade of quiescence.

# **Petrifications, Patronuses & Picnics**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## **CHAPTER 35: Petrifications, Patronuses & Picnics**

***14 February 1993***

The petrification of Cormac McLaggen sent shockwaves through the school, and not just for the petrification itself. Everyone seemed to know that McLaggen had openly accused Jim Potter of being the Heir of Slytherin, and then, just hours later, the Heir of Slytherin (whoever that was) had petrified the young Gryffindor just like Mrs. Norris before him. Needless to say, nearly everyone assumed that Jim was responsible, particularly after it came out that he had no alibi for the time of the attack on McLaggen. Increasingly reluctant to spend time in Gryffindor Tower where most of his house-mates were suspicious and occasionally hostile, Jim had been up in the Astronomy Tower brooding by himself when the petrification took place.

It took Professor Snape about a week to convert the small vial of Mandrake extract provided by Gilderoy Lockhart into enough Restorative Draught to cure young Cormac. Upon awakening, Cormac could remember nothing about how he came to be petrified except a memory of "big yellow eyes." At dinner the first night after Cormac was released from the Infirmary (and during which, young McLaggen continually gave Jim a glare that somehow combined both fear and hatred), Dumbledore publicly thanked Lockhart for his extraordinarily generous contribution. As Neville explained

to the other Gryffindors, Mandrakes are incredibly difficult to grow, as most of the Herbology students could attest. But even worse, while every part of the mature Mandrake was useful for potions, the Restorative Draught required fairly large quantities of distilled Essence of Mandrake, which required pulping the entire plant to produce. Some of the more expensive Mandrake-based curatives might require a few drops of the precious fluid, but most Mandrake-based potions just needed a pinch of powdered Mandrake leaf or a slice of Mandrake bulb. The specific formula used to revive McLaggen, however, required an astonishing five drams of purified Essence (a little less than four teaspoons) which would have required the complete distillation of a half-dozen adult Mandrakes at a cost of tens of thousands of galleons on the open market.

Indeed, the *reason* Professor Sprout devoted so much class time to the cultivation of the dangerous and ill-tempered plants was that the Herbology class's annual Mandrake harvest provided almost five percent of the school's annual budget, as Hogwarts was the only site in Britain that could cultivate Mandrakes in any significant quantities. Raising Mandrakes to maturity was an exacting process that required regular repotting and careful soil adjustment all performed *without* the use of magic (which would spoil the cultivation). Furthermore, the adjustments had to be made at regular intervals determined by complex astrological conjunctions. Professor Sprout consulted with Professor Sinestra, the Astronomy professor, almost weekly to ensure that every modification to the plants would be performed at the most auspicious time. It didn't help that the plants were so inherently dangerous due to their potentially lethal screams that by February only NEWTs level Herbology students were still allowed to handle the increasingly truculent humanoid plants.

After Cormac's revivification, McGonagal ordered that a prefect accompany Jim to and from all his classes, in part to ensure that he had an alibi if there were any further petrifications, but also for the boy's safety, as the number of hexes and jinxes directed towards the suspected Heir of Slytherin increased significantly. She also docked scores of points from her own house for the Lions' mistreatment of the boy, but Jim eventually stopped reporting harassment against himself because he felt guilty over costing the House so many points.

After Cormac, however, there were no further petrifications, or at least so far. The rest of January passed without incident, and by Valentines Day, the students were just beginning to relax. On the day in question, Lockhart, with the aid of some of his more adoring female students, had decorated the Great Hall with pink streamers and heart-shaped balloons as a way of cheering up the school. At breakfast, Professor Sprout had jokingly asked if he'd considered hiring dwarves to dress up as cherubs and deliver Valentine's messages. Lockhart replied mischievously that he'd looked into it but the dwarves charged too much and anyway the surly hirsute little creatures wouldn't be nearly as endearing in diapers with little wings on their backs as the depictions of Cupid might suggest.

"There are worse ways to celebrate the holiday, I suppose, Gilderoy" said Flitwick with twinkling eyes. "I still recall the chaos you unleashed on the school on Valentine's Day in 1980."

"Chaos, Filius?" he said in confusion. "I'm sure you exaggerate."



"Exaggerate, my boy?" the diminutive professor said with a laugh. "You sent 800 Valentine's messages to yourself! We had to cancel lunch because of all the owl droppings befouling the Great Hall!"

Lockhart stared at his fellow Ravenclaw as if trying to figure out if he was joking. Then, he laughed. "Ha-*ha*! You know I'd quite forgotten about that bit of foolishness! I don't remember if I apologized at the time for however many points I cost Ravenclaw, but if not, I eagerly do so now."

"Oh, water under the bridge, my boy. Water under the bridge." Flitwick laughed. On the other side of him, however, Snape observed the conversation silently and with an odd expression.

"How are your projects proceeding, Gilderoy?" he finally said. "I have yet to see anything that topped the spectacle of your dueling club, though frankly, I'm not sure I wish to."

"Well, since you asked, this afternoon, Team Protector will finally begin their efforts to produce a Patronus. I'll be sure to let you know how successful they are."

"Honestly, Gilderoy," said Flitwick, "do you really think students that young can produce a Patronus? It's auror level magic!"

Lockhart shrugged. "We learn through experimentation, Filius. The point of Team Protector is to determine if students with a certain psychological makeup might have greater facility with the Charm than the typical wizard. Even if the answer is 'no,' we've still learned more than we knew yesterday." He turned and looked towards Snape. "Did *you* ever master the Patronus Charm, Severus?"

The Potions Master nodded. "I did so not long after graduation, though I have not had cause to cast the Charm in many years." Almost imperceptibly, he glanced down to the far end of the teacher's table. "I suppose I should at some point. I'm somewhat curious as to whether it's the same manifestation as it was back then."

If Lockhart noticed that it had been Lily Potter who had drawn Snape's gaze, he gave no sign.

Twenty minutes later, Snape was in his quarters with his wand in his hand and an oddly nervous expression on his face. He took a deep breath and extended his wand.

***"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"***

There was a blast of luminescent fog which erupted from the tip of his wand and resolved itself into the shape of a delicate silvery doe. Snape frowned and waved his wand, dispelling the Patronus.

"Dammit," he muttered to himself.

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### ***Later that afternoon...***

The members of Team Protector were all quite excited. After months of experimenting with various esoteric charms and spells designed to prepare them for this day, they were finally ready for their first attempt at the Patronus Charm. After several weeks spent practicing the movements and the incantation (and meditating on how to imagine one's happiest memory and greatest fear simultaneously), it was time. Lockhart demonstrated the Charm one last time and summoned his own strange-looking Patronus. After considerable research, Emily Rosen had finally identified it as a thylacine, also known as the Tasmanian Wolf or the

Tasmanian Tiger, an animal that had been driven to extinction some sixty years before. When she mentioned this to Lockhart, he laughed and responded cryptically: "As far as the Muggles know, anyway."

After that, Lockhart went around the room, with the students making their attempts one at a time. After each attempt, Lockhart critiqued the student's performance and gave advice, and each student had three attempts before he moved on to the next. Of the first six students, three produced nothing at all, two could produce a small wisp of silvery fog, and the last, Marcus Flint, was able to produce a silvery ball about almost two feet in diameter at the tip of his wand, the best performance so far. Indeed, Lockhart congratulated the prefect as he was, so far, the only student to produce a Patronus that might actually ward off a Dementor. With the bar set high by his friend and fellow Slytherin, Harry took a deep breath and attempted to cast the spell. Nothing happened. Even after coaching from Lockhart, Harry remained unable to produce any sign of his Patronus after his second or third attempts. Understandably, he was disappointed.

Finally, Lockhart moved on to the last team member: Neville Longbottom, who swallowed nervously at Harry's lack of success. The thought that he might succeed at something where Harry had failed seemed unthinkable to the young Gryffindor. Then, he looked over towards Harry who despite his own failure was still smiling and offering words of encouragement. Neville pointed his wand towards the center of the room. Then ... he stopped and shook his head. Pulling his wand back in to his chest, Neville closed his eyes. Everyone else looked to one another in surprise and amusement, but Neville ignored them. Instead, he focused inwardly on his own memories. The smell of salt air. The taste of seawater forcing its way down his throat. The

bitter cold of the Irish Sea. The crushing terror that came with the knowledge that he was about to die. And then ... he remembered the feeling of being lifted up, up towards the heavens, and the absolute certainty that he had magic and that magic would always be there to protect him. His uncle might have stolen that memory from him, but Neville had it back now, and he would never again let it go.

Neville smiled and opened his eyes. Then, he pointed his wand with confidence. "***EXPECTO PATRONUM!***" Out of his wand came a *blast* of silvery light that created a fog covering a ten-foot radius in the center of the room. It only lasted a few seconds, and Neville's knees nearly buckled when the spell dissipated, but he had done it. Neville Longbottom, at the age of twelve, had just created an incorporeal Patronus. The amazed team members gathered around to congratulate the boy and pat him on the back.

"Congratulations, Longbottom, on making history," said Lockhart. "You are, as far as I've been able to research, the youngest person to have ever successfully cast the Patronus Charm. *But* I don't want you to rest on your laurels, young man. We have four months left before the end of term, and I won't rest until the rest of you can match Longbottom's feat, nor until you, Longbottom, can cast a *corporeal* Patronus!"

Encouraged by Neville's achievement, the rest of the team went back to work with renewed vigor.

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Hours later, Harry accompanied Neville to the Owlery, as he wanted to send a letter to his grandmother about his success. As Neville finished tying the letter to the school owl before sending it on its way, Harry stood by quietly. He had, in fact, been unusually quiet since the duo had left the

DADA classroom, a fact that Neville had noticed. Finally, after a brief hesitation, the Gryffindor took a deep breath and addressed the elephant in the room.

"Harry, don't take this the wrong way, but ... are you ... *jealous* that I'm so much farther ahead with the Patronus that you are?"

Harry scoffed. "Nonsense, Neville, don't be ridiculous. It's great that you've taken to the spell so quickly. I only wish I was doing as well... or that I was doing anything at all, that is. But anyway, I'm sure I'll get it eventually. But that doesn't ... I mean ... it's ..." Harry's voice trailed away somewhat awkwardly. Then, he sighed loudly and closed his eyes. After several seconds, a confused Neville spoke up.

"Um, Harry?" Harry gave out a soft "shh!" and held up a hand to stop Neville from speaking again. After another fifteen seconds or so, Harry's eyes popped open in obvious surprise.

"Huh. Well I'll be damned. I *am* jealous." Harry looked at Neville contritely. "Sorry about that, mate. I'll try to be more self-aware about that in the future."

"Um, sure," Neville replied before adding "What?!"

"Occlumency exercises. Level two was all about suppressing emotions. Level three is about being self-aware of how emotions influence actions and choosing to feel emotions that are valid and helpful instead of self-defeating. I've been working on these exercises for a few weeks, but this is the first time I've actually caught myself feeling something that I didn't want to feel. *Weird experience*, let me tell you!"

"Uh-huh. So then ... you *are* jealous?"

"Well ... I *was*. But now that I consciously realize it, I can choose to stop feeling that way. It's silly to be angry with you because you can do something I can't. I should be focusing instead on why I *can't* do it as well as you. Because how well *you* can cast the spell has no bearing on why I can or can't."

Neville nodded, once again glad that the Heir's ring on his finger made it unnecessary to jump his minds through the hoops that Harry seemed to think were necessary. "So, any thoughts on what might be holding you back?"

"No. I mean, I've got a happy memory, I think. It makes *me* happy anyway."

Neville thought about that for a second and then crooked his head. "Um, Harry. Your happy memory? Just between us – does it involve something bad happening to Jim or your parents?"

Harry blushed slightly. "No... Maybe... Okay, yeah. Anyway, so what if it did?" In point of fact, the memory he'd been using during that afternoon's exercises was the look on Jim's face at the dueling club meeting where he'd been outed as a Parselmouth in front of all his friends.

Neville sighed. "Harry, the Patronus is fueled by genuine happiness, and preferably by outright joy. For me, it was realizing that I wasn't a squib and that my magic was actually powerful enough to save me from dying. However satisfying you think it might be to see Jim and your parents pay for how you were treated, I don't think that's actually the right kind of happiness to fuel a Patronus."

"Well, what would you suggest, Neville? I don't want to sound like a whiner, but the fact is ... I don't *have* a lot of happy memories."

Neville thought for a moment. "Jim said after the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match that you were actually laughing while that crazy spiked Bludger was after you. '*Giggling insanely*' was the phrase he used. Was that true?"

Harry cleared his throat in embarrassment. "I suppose. Why?"

Neville shrugged and smiled. "Maybe the rush you got from flying on a broom while fighting for your life is closer to a 'happy memory' than just taking pleasure in Jim having a bad day."

Harry gave his friend a sour expression before considering his words more seriously. Then, he closed his eyes and used his Occlumency to pull up the memory of the Quidditch match, specifically that wonderful moment just *before* he got knocked out of the sky when he passed through the ring of the Quidditch goal. The feeling of weightlessness when he released his broom for those few precious seconds. The satisfying crunch of the spiked Bludger as it hit the ring and became trapped. The elation of victory, not just in the Quidditch match, but in his fight for his life. Harry pulled out his wand once more. "***EXPECTO PATRONUM.***"

Around him, there was a flurry of excited hooting from the owls as the light from Harry's wand lit up the Owlery. The silver ball of mist wasn't nearly as big as Neville's Patronus, nor even quite as big as the sphere produced by Marcus, but it was there. Harry grinned at Neville who affectionately punched his brother-in-all-but-blood in the arm.

It had been a good day after all.

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***15 February 1993***

It had been a terrible, terrible day, and Jim hadn't even started his breakfast yet. The day he'd been dreading ever since he'd revealed his Parseltongue ability had finally arrived – the *Daily Prophet* had the story. The byline wasn't by Rita Skeeter for once, but rather one of her chief rivals at the paper, a muckracking investigative journalist named Andrew Smudgley who had reported on the successful break-in at Gringotts in the summer of 1991. And now, he had the story about Jim Potter.

***BOY-WHO-LIVED TALKS TO SNAKES!***  
***CARRIER OF SLYTHERIN'S NOTORIOUS LEGACY!***

*By Andrew Smudgley for the Daily Prophet*

*Since October 31 st of 1981, this nation has venerated a young boy for his role in saving us all from the Evil of Our Time. We have all cheerfully accepted a fairy tale resolution to the war that had torn this nation apart. After all, how could a fairy tale like that possibly end except with You-Know-Who being destroyed through the innocence and purity of a tiny babe? That babe was Jim Potter, and he has been the hero of this nation ever since. But what kind of hero is Jim Potter? How exactly did Jim Potter defeat You-Know-Who, if that is, in fact, what happened? And most importantly, what does it mean for us all that Jim Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived is a **Parselmouth**, the inheritor of a gift as synonymous with Salazar Slytherin as it is with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.*

*Yes, readers, it's true. Jim Potter is indeed a Parselmouth, a fact made known to most of his peers at Hogwarts after a magical anomaly unleashed by Young Jim himself at a dueling club meeting manifested as a giant fire-breathing snake. Was this deliberate on the part of Jim Potter? Who can say? While some witnesses claim that Jim may have*



*used his unholy powers to restrain what some witnesses described as "a demon snake," others claim he appeared to be egging the beast on to attack his innocent classmates until the creature was dispelled by the quick thinking of Jim's older brother, Harry Potter, himself an up-and-coming member of Slytherin House. Witnesses say that after dispelling the demon snake, Harry Potter immediately rushed to make certain that none of the other mostly Gryffindor students were harmed in the fracas while Jim merely stood by and watched, seemingly without concern. One wonders if it is possible that the Potter Twins might have been mis-Sorted.*

*Story continues on page 5.*

Next to the inflammatory article was a picture of Jim Potter looking off into the distance with what might have been cold expression or perhaps simply one of boredom. Beneath the photo was a byline: "Photo courtesy of Colin Creevey." When Jim read that, he turned to glare at the First Year Gryffindor, who paled and looked as if he might cry. Then, Jim shook his head and stormed out of the Great Hall angrily.

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## **20 February 1993**

Harry entered the mostly empty classroom right on time. The rest of the school was in the Great Hall for lunch, but Harry had been invited by Hermione Grange to "a picnic" of all things which was to be held in the seldom used first-floor CoMC classroom, the one with the picture of Esme the Ashwinder who continued to ignore Harry like all the other snake paintings in the school. Intrigued by the invitation, he only became more so when he entered the room and saw that Granger was joined by Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood,

and Penelope Clearwater. Immediately, he deduced what Hermione's cryptic invitation was really about.

The four girls had cleared a space in the middle of the floor and spread out a blanket. There was a plate of sandwiches and a large pitcher of pumpkin juice with plates and glasses for everyone. Harry smiled politely and took his place on the floor with the others. Inwardly, he was somewhat worried. He had told Hermione about his condition in confidence. If she'd shared the information with the rest of Team Mysterioso ...

"Well, Hermione, thank you for inviting me. I must say, the demographics of the group are a little daunting. If I'd known there would be four lovely young ladies, I'd have brought Neville, Theo and Blaise along with me. Or maybe Percy." With that last comment, he wriggled his eyes significantly in Penelope's direction.

"What's *that* supposed to mean, Potter?" she asked somewhat anxiously.

"It's alright, Penelope," said Ginny. "The fact that you and Percy have been seeing one another is probably the worst kept secret in school. The only reason the Twins haven't been harassing Percy since last summer is that I threatened to wash their underpants with deep heating ointment if they said anything."

"Oh, well ... thanks?" said Penelope uncertainly.

"So, let's cut to the chase, shall we?" said Harry. "What exactly does Team Mysterioso want with little old me?"

Hermione spoke up. "Well, as we discussed last Christmas, Luna here thinks that there's something ... anomalous about you that she can sense. Or more accurately, that she

can't rightly sense but can detect by its absence. I haven't told Luna or anyone else about the other matters you and I discussed that night, but Luna would like to ask you some questions, and the rest of us would like to observe. If that's alright with you, of course."

"Certainly," said Harry easily. "Though I reserve the right to not answer or even to lie if it suits me. I'm a Slytherin, after all."

*"Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."* Luna recited in a serious voice.

Harry smiled. "Oscar Wilde! You're the second person in as many months to quote Oscar Wilde at me! Anyway, if we're all exchanging life stories, I'd like to hear each of yours first. Fair is fair, after all."

The girls all looked at one another somewhat nervously before Ginny shrugged casually.

"Fine. I'm Ginny Weasley, First Year Slytherin. I'm the youngest of seven and the first girl born to the Weasley family since the late 1700's. Apparently, that little fact may have something to do with my family's blood feud with the Malfoy's. My family has always treated me like a little princess to be protected and pampered, and it's always driven me crazy, so I generally rebelled by sneaking out on the sly and doing things my parents wouldn't approve of, like teaching myself to fly a broom or learning to pick locks. I also illegally learned the Bat-Bogey Hex at the age of 9 by stealing my brother Bill's wand at night when he came home to visit that Christmas. Despite generations of Gryffindor Weasleys, my family has been very supportive of me being a Slytherin ... with one notable exception. Any questions?"

"How bad has Ron been about that?" asked Harry.

She took a deep breath. "Surprisingly not that bad. We've ... pretty much avoided each other since the day after my Sorting. I'm kind of dreading next summer when we'll be stuck in a house together and our mother will notice and get upset if we never speak to one another."

No one had any additional questions for Ginny, so it was Hermione's turn. She hesitated for a moment. Then, she looked at Harry and decided to go with total honesty. "I'm a Muggle-born who grew up in London. Belgravia to be exact. My family on my mother's side was upper-middle class, while my father's side was relatively wealthy. My parents met in dentistry school. Today, they own a private practice specializing in cosmetic dentistry." She frowned slightly. "They don't take NHS patients. It's all private practice and very lucrative. I was the obligatory child who was only born because the grandparents were insistent. After I was born, my mother took the compulsory two weeks off before going right back to work. I was essentially raised by a succession of nannies and au pairs, a surprising number of whom were Swedish for some reason. The only significant time I ever spent with my parents was during family vacations, and even then, the nanny came along. Although last summer, they brought along a tutor instead. I guess I'm too old for a nanny now, and Mother insists that I pass my A Level with my age group in case '*this whole magic thing*' doesn't work out."

Harry's eyes widened slightly at how forthright Hermione was. His Slytherin side was at once impressed by and annoyed with his friend – by being so honest about personal matters, she successfully put emotional pressure on him to do the same when it was his turn. He declined to ask Hermione any questions, though Luna had a few about

what a "cosmetic dentist" was. Penelope Clearwater also asked if she could talk with Hermione later on the topic of "A Levels." Harry turned his attention to the Ravenclaw prefect, about whom he knew very little.

"Um, okay," she began tentatively. "My name's Penelope Clearwater. My father was Muggle-born and my mother was a Half-blood, so I'm considered a Half-Blood despite having two wizarding parents. I was raised in Appleby in Lincolnshire. Actually, if you want to be precise, I was raised in *Upper* Appleby, which is a magical community of about 150 wizards and witches that's hidden inside Appleby proper, a village of about 600 muggles that's three miles from Scunthorpe, a pretty large Muggle town of about 70,000. So I guess you could say I was both wizard-raised *and* Muggle-raised. My parents insisted that I get a Muggle education, so as soon as I was old enough to get my accidental magic under control, so I went to a Muggle primary school in Scunthorpe. My mother was a teacher there, and she pushed me to excel at my studies which is what got me into Ravenclaw." She paused somewhat nervously. "And yes, I am *sort of* dating Percy Weasley, though we're keeping it quiet for now. He's worried that his brothers will pick on him and, well, to be honest about it, I don't want to get serious with anyone until I know where I'm going after graduation. You see, my parents want me to move overseas once I've passed my NEWTs. They both wanted me to get a Hogwarts education, but after that, they say there's no point in trying to make a living here in Britain if you're not a Pureblood. Honestly, I've always suspected that I was ... *unplanned* and that Mum and Dad would have left for America back in 1976 if I hadn't come along."

"Still though?" Harry asked somewhat incredulously. "It's been almost twelve years since You-Know-Who was

destroyed, and they're still considering emigrating?"

She shrugged lamely. "Not enough has changed since then. The British system of government is still based on the idea that a few dozen families that have been around since before William the Conqueror should run everything. The only elected office is Minister of Magic, and you can't even run for that unless the Wizengamot approves you as a candidate, which means that it's nearly impossible for Half-Bloods to get it, and there's only ever been one Muggle-born. Every other position of authority is appointed. I don't know for sure if things are better in America where it's actually *illegal* to marry another witch or wizard if neither of you have any Muggle great-grandparents, but I wouldn't feel like my ancestry put a black mark on my record that's been there since before I was born."

Harry nodded at that and then finally turned his attention to Luna, the girl whose story he *really* wanted to hear. The girl looked at him dreamily before beginning her story.

"I'm glad my mother and father didn't move to America, I suppose, because I might never have been born if they had. Both my parents were from old families that were Pureblooded for generations, though neither of them was from a Noble family. Xenophilius Lovegood and Pandora Lovegood née Croaker. Daddy runs *The Quibbler*, which is the only privately owned newspaper in the country. When I was a little girl, he ran it as a sort of joke, but after Mummy died, he started taking it more seriously, only ... without actually changing what he wrote. I guess you could say he's more serious about his jokes now. Mummy worked for the Ministry before I was born. I never knew what department, and Daddy didn't like to talk about it. After I was born, she worked from home while taking care of me."

Luna smiled wistfully. "As far back as I can remember, I've always been able to see ... things. I used to worry that there was something wrong with me when I realized other people *couldn't* see what I saw. But Mummy assured me that the things I saw were real but that other people couldn't see them and that I should keep what I saw to myself. I tried to do that until she died ... after that, I suppose I stopped worrying about what other people thought. She was the one who told me what nargles were. And wrackspurts and fury-flies and all the rest, though I've seen a few things since then that she never described that I had to make up my own names for."

"Like Blibbering Humdingers, perhaps?" asked Hermione with a smile.

"Oh no, Hermione. She told me about those the same time she told me about the Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

Harry spoke up. "Do you have a name for whatever you see in me, Luna?"

She shook her head. "That's just it. I *don't* see anything in you. It's like ... like I can see the shadow of something that's hiding from me. It's very strange."

"Stranger than nargles and wrackspurts and all the rest?"

"Very much so. I've seen all those things for as long as I can remember. I've *never* seen anything like you, Harry."

He snorted. "Story of my life, I suppose. The Uncanny Harry Potter." Then, he hesitated. "Luna, I hate to ask this but ... how did you mother die?"

"Harry!" exclaimed Ginny at his apparent insensitivity.

"It's okay, Ginny. You've got a reason for asking, don't you, Harry?" Luna gave him an odd look, as though she weren't looking at him but around him.

"Possibly. Just an idea I'd had."

Luna nodded. "It was when I was eight. Mummy was working as some sort of freelance spell designer out of a laboratory she'd set up in the basement of our home. I was sitting off to one side playing with some toys while she worked on one of her spell projects. Suddenly, she ... she screamed very loudly. And then ... she was gone." Luna rubbed her arms as if suddenly cold. "My father rushed in right as it happened. I think must have thrown himself across me to shield me from whatever happened to my mother." She looked away. "He was never the same after that. I suppose I wasn't either."

"I'm sorry, Luna. Thank you for telling me." Harry took a deep breath and addressed the entire group. "Okay, my turn. I doubt I have much to say that you don't already know. I'm the Heir to House Potter and am older than the Boy-Who-Lived by about eight minutes. When You-Know-Who attacked and was destroyed by Jim, a piece of falling masonry gave me this scar which isn't nearly as famous or impressive as his. I was misidentified as a squib and sent to live with Muggle relatives. They were awful, utterly and completely awful. And that's all I care to say about *that*. I was eventually revealed as a wizard, came to Hogwarts, and sorted into Slytherin, which caused *all kinds* of unpleasantness in the Potter household which I am *still* sorting through. I like Quidditch and Potions and, for a twelve-year-old, I'm an excellent cook. Any questions?"

"What was your education like?" Luna asked before anyone else could respond. Harry was surprised by the question.



"Um, substandard, I suppose. I went to a primary school in Surrey and," he paused and cleared his throat, "my guardians didn't like it very much when I outperformed my cousin, and since he was quite proud of his willful ignorance, that pretty much meant that I never pushed myself academically before getting to Hogwarts."

"Did you enjoy reading as a child?"

He crooked an eyebrow. "Not particularly. Until I started Hogwarts, I never had the time. And even after, it's mainly been study work. I've never been the sort of person who read for pleasure. Why do you ask?"

Luna ignored the question, and a strange intensity overtook her normally dreamy expression. "How is your Occlumency coming along?"

"How did you ...?"

"The pattern of your nargles is very similar to what I've seen from other people who I know practice it. Almost identical to the pattern of Professor Snape's nargles, actually. And you rarely show signs of wrackspurts. Do you have an eidetic memory yet?"

Harry stiffened in response to how the young girl was interrogating him in a way very different from her normal patterns of speech. He sensed that she was deliberately trying to throw him off balance with her rapid-fire questions, but he didn't know why. "It's not automatic. I have to actively think about trying to remember something before I can recall it, but at that point I can remember it perfectly."

"Luna, what's going on?" asked Ginny with a slight concern. Luna ignored her and kept her gaze fixed on Harry. When

she spoke, it sounded almost as if she were springing a trap.

"Harry, do you *remember* when your first heard that quote earlier that you identified as Oscar Wilde? The one about lying being the art of telling beautiful untrue things?"

Harry opened his mouth ... and then slammed it shut as his eyes widened in surprise. He looked away as he thought about the Wilde quote. He remembered it was from an essay Wilde had written called *The Decay of Lying*. But for the life of him, he couldn't remember ever actually reading it, or even hearing someone else quote from it. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure he'd ever heard of Oscar Wilde before Lady Augusta had mentioned him at Christmas.

"Here's something easier, perhaps. How old were you when you learned what the word *demographics* meant? Or *daunting* or *uncanny*? Do you remember learning those words in school well enough to use them conversationally?"

Harry didn't answer, mainly because he couldn't. Noticing her friend's distress no matter how well he concealed it, Hermione interrupted.

"Luna, why is this important?"

"I don't know that it is," she replied. "But it's strange enough that it might be connected to Harry's other ... issue."

"What?" Harry said with an edge in his voice.

"What's *strange enough* about me not remembering those things?"

"Harry," Luna said, "it's one thing for you to be smart, a genius even. But you're *awfully well-spoken* for someone

who says he had a substandard education, who didn't really try in primary because he'd be punished if he'd gotten good grades, and who never took up the habit of reading for pleasure. Most of the students here at Hogwarts are wizarding children who had Educational Potions. Most of the Muggle-raised children who *haven't* had Educational Potions either had strong primary school educations, like Hermione or Penelope or Justin Finch-Fletchley. Or else they're more like Dean Thomas or Colin Creevey, neither of whom is known for his vocabulary. But you, Harry? For someone who was actively prevented from getting a good primary education, you *know lots of things*. Do you know *how* you know them?"

Harry sat stunned by Luna's questions. Somehow, since coming to Hogwarts, he'd just *accepted* the fact that he was extremely clever and never stopped to think about how he was also fairly erudite. "*Come to think of it,*" he thought to himself in a daze, "*how did I know what erudite meant?!*" Then, he noticed that Luna was now leaning slightly back from him with a somewhat fearful expression on his face.

"Luna..."

"Harry," she interrupted, "be honest with me. This is important. Are you angry with me right now?"

Once again, the question caught him by surprise. Instinctively, he focused his Occlumency on self-analysis, which revealed that his dominant emotions were surprise, concern and fear without a trace of anger. "No, not at all. Why?"

She swallowed. "Well, I didn't *think* you were angry at me ... but I'm suddenly feeling a strong anger *coming from*

*you* that's directed towards ..." She paused abruptly. "Okay, and just like that, the feeling's gone. Very strange."

"Uh-huh," he replied with mild sarcasm. "And you think that whatever it is that you ... can't see is for some reason improving my vocabulary without my knowledge *and* also gets angry with you whenever it forgets to hide itself?"

She shrugged. "Strange phenomena that surround a singular individual are likely to be connected, one would think." She leaned forward. "Harry, I promise. If you can help us to find out what's so strange about me and why, I'll do everything I can to do the same for you. Deal?"

Harry laughed and rubbed his hands across his face. Honestly, he had not set out to have such a weird day. He looked up at the odd girl. "Are you willing to do whatever it takes to solve our ... respective strangeness?" She nodded.

He took a deep breath and studied the other three confused girls. "Okay," he said. "I've got one idea off the bat, but we probably need to consult with Professor Lockhart first, since he's in charge of this team of yours."

Penelope scoffed. "Really? Just like that? You think you've got an idea we haven't thought of?"

"What I've got, Penelope, is an idea I *know* you haven't thought of because you're all basically nice kind people who are very fond of Luna and would never do anything that you feared might hurt her feelings."

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "And that *doesn't* apply to you?"

"Well, I *am* fond of Luna and I *don't* want to hurt her feelings. *But* I am also ruthless enough to not recoil from an

idea for something that might hurt her feelings in the short term until I've considered its long term benefits."

"What do you have in mind?" asked Hermione with a hint of suspicion.

He took a deep breath and exhaled, favoring Luna with a mildly sad expression. It was clear that he *didn't* want to hurt the girls, but he also thought that she should know what was on his mind.

"Okay. We know Luna can see all these ... things. And we know that she learned names for most of these things from her late mother. So the way I see it, there's only two possibilities. Option one: Whatever erased all knowledge of nargles and wrackspurts etcetera etcetera from almost the entire world is *completely unrelated* to Luna Lovegood and it's just a fluke she remembers it all, in which case you'll never figure out what caused it because you just don't have enough information. Option two: Whatever erased all that knowledge *is* connected to Luna, in which case it probably has something to do with the second most interesting thing about her."

Hermione blinked in confusion. "The *second* most interesting thing?"

He nodded. "The *most* interesting thing is that she can see invisible creatures that no one else can detect. The *second* most interesting thing is the circumstances surrounding her mother's death."

"How is that ... *interesting*?" Penelope said somewhat angrily. "Probably a third of the kids in this school are missing at least one parent. There was a civil war going on for over a decade."

"Yes, but Pandora Lovegood didn't die in the War. She died years after it was over in a freak spell design accident." He turned to his best friend.

"Hermione, after our little mishap last spring where we blew out a set of windows while trying to make enchanted paper telephones, I did some research to see if there were laws governing magical experimentation that we might be in danger of violating. As it turns out, we were fine, because there's almost no regulation that governs enchanting objects with preexisting spells so long as they aren't inherently dangerous and don't violate the Statute of Secrecy. *Experimental spell design*, on the other hand, is regulated to hell and back. Most wizards and witches who design new spells work directly for the Ministry in some capacity and do all their work at remote research installations. The ones who work in the private sector are required to work in custom labs that are subject to constant and rigorous Ministry oversight. In other words, it is *decidedly odd* that Pandora Lovegood chose to work on some kind of experimental spell *in the basement of her house with her eight-year-old daughter in the room.*"

He turned to look at Luna. "I'm sorry, Luna. I know this may be difficult for you. But as a clever person once told me, '*strange phenomena that surround a singular individual are likely to be connected.*' If you want to know the secret behind your mysterious powers, I think the first step is to figure out exactly how your mother died, and more importantly, exactly what sort of spell she was working on that killed her."

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The meeting continued for another fifteen minutes. It was resolved that the girls would discuss the matter with Lockhart and see if he could obtain a pensieve. Harry had

one, of course, but that was not a fact he wanted spread around, so he would wait and see if Lockhart could acquire one before donating his own to the cause. Assuming that Lockhart was amenable, they would meet again at some point in the future to review Luna's memory of her mother's death.

Shortly before one o'clock, Team Mysterio *plus one* finished both their discussions and their lunch and left the classroom. Once outside, the five were surprised to see pandemonium in the hallways with students running in every direction. Harry was even more surprised to notice that down the hallway near the front doors to the school were two aurors directing traffic. Before he could react though, everyone heard the voice of Minerva McGonagall echo through the school.

**"All students report to their dormitory Common Rooms immediately for a headcount. Prefects, once you have taken roll, report any missing students to me via Floo. Curfew is now in effect, and students found in violation of it will have two weeks detention with Mr. Filch. That is all."**

Harry and the four girls looked at one another in confusion. Then, Ginny noticed Astoria Greengrass running past. The girl was crying.

"Tori! Hold up! What's going on?!"

Astoria turned towards the group with a stricken expression. "Oh Ginny! It's ... it's *COLIN*!"

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***Meanwhile in the Owlery...***

Colin Creevey lay on the floor of the Owlery, petrified, his unblinking eyes staring up at the ceiling. There was a crumpled letter still clenched in one unmoving hand, and the boy's prized camera lay smashed to bits on the ground nearby. Perversely, there was a splatter of white owl droppings on his forehead that almost seemed to insult him. Standing in a circle around him were Albus Dumbledore, James Potter, and Rufus Scrimgeour. And written on the wall nearby was yet another threatening message.

**THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN**  
WILL NOT BE MOCKED  
MUDBLOODS BE WARNED

"Well, Albus?" Scrimgeour asked sarcastically. "*Now* do you agree that this is a matter for the DMLE?"

### Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Hermione's description of her home life is reworked slightly from a similar paragraph in Chapter 23 of "A Well-Groomed Mind" (sadly abandoned, it seems) by Lady Khali. This was always one of my favorite depictions of Hermione's home life, which is usually shown as incredibly dull Muggle domesticity, and Lady Khali's alternative vision of a pair of upper class snobs who treated Hermione with benign neglect was, IMO, much more interesting and casts an alternative light on things like Hermione's frequent decision not to go home at Christmas and eventually her decision to erase her parents memories of her.

AN 2: In a similar but lighter vein, Luna's fondness for Oscar Wilde is an oblique shout-out to "Oh God Not Again!" by Sarah1281.



AN 3: The bit about the high cost and relative scarcity of Mandrakes is my attempt to write around the oft-asked question "Why didn't they just go to Diagon Alley and BUY Mandrake Potions rather than just let those kids stay petrified for half a year!?" One of the jokes in the aforementioned "Oh God Not Again!" is that the time-tossed Harry who is reliving his Hogwarts years shows up for second year with gallons of the stuff that he passes out like Kool-Aid whenever anyone gets petrified.

# Investigations Into Dark Matters

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 36: Investigations Into Dark Matters

***21 February 1993***

***The Hogwarts Owlery***

*"Well, Albus?" Scrimgeour asked sarcastically. "Now do you agree that this is a matter for the DMLE?"*

Dumbledore sighed. "Honestly, Rufus! I apprised the DMLE of these matter *from the start* after the incident on Halloween. For that matter, I have been in favor of an official DMLE investigation of this 'Heir of Slytherin' business since 1943! Unfortunately, you know as well as I what factors thwart both our desires."

"Factors, sir?" inquired James Potter which earned him a glare from his superior.

"It has to do with the respective charters of both Hogwarts and the Wizengamot, James," said the Headmaster. "Of the two, Hogwarts was founded five centuries earlier by an alliance the four most powerful wizards and witches of that era, and they were quite intent that what passed for wizarding government at the time should have no say in how their school was to be run. Centuries later, both the Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic were able to obtain some influence over Hogwarts as a result of magical treaties agreed to by former Headmasters, but *every* Headmaster upon obtaining the position is obliged to swear an Unbreakable Oath to maintain

Hogwarts independence from the government as much as possible. The Founders *also* built magical defenses into the castle to protect against sieges and invasions. These defenses cannot be updated to understand our more civilized modern climate and so cannot tell the difference between a squad of aurors and an invading army. Unless they are acting pursuant to an official arrest warrant, the castle will identify aurors acting in their official capacities as a hostile invading force and respond accordingly. The only way you, Rufus, and the other aurors downstairs can even perform your investigative duties today is because I am actively suppressing the school's very strong desire to attack you all violently, which I will only be able to do for another few hours at most. And the only way to allow the DMLE *unfettered* access to the school is if I exercise my authority as Headmaster to *shut Hogwarts down* for a period of no less than two years, an extreme step only taken twice before in Hogwarts history, and one I am unwilling to take at this point."

"And if a student dies from these petrifications, Albus, like what happened the last time?" Scrimgeour said grimly.

"Then, like the last time, I will likely spend years wondering if I could have done something differently, even though realistically the most probable answer is '*no, I could not.*'"

Scrimgeour shook his head in irritation and then carefully knelt down to examine Colin Creevey's petrified form. He tugged gently on the letter clutched in the boy's frozen hand, and when it would not move, he gestured at it with his wand and summoned it directly into his hand without tearing it. To his surprise, it was addressed to the *Daily Prophet*. Then, something else attracted the leonine auror's attention, and he lifted up the bottom of the boy's robe.

There was a five-inch long jagged rip starting at the hem. He held the tear up for the others to see.

"Albus, how long could the boy have gotten around with a robe like this without getting docked points?"

The Headmaster closed his eyes, and the other two men could feel the magical ambiance of the castle thicken as he communed with it. "Mr. Creevey hasn't had any points taken for any reason at all in over a month, let alone for improper attire. The Gryffindor prefects are quite diligent. Most likely, they would have noticed and repaired that tear for him if he'd gotten it more than a day ago."

Scrimgeour nodded and started clumsily to stand back up, grunting in pain from the leg that had been crippled the previous summer. Potter moved to help him stand, but when the older man practically snarled at him, he quickly stepped back. Once standing, the Chief Auror waved his wand again. "***SCRUTIMINIUS LOOSE BLACK THREADS.***" A tiny light emanated from the tip of his wand, accompanied by soft humming noise that grew louder as he moved around the room. Eventually, the Detection Charm led him down the stairs. Finally, on a piece of railing at the edge of the landing just below the Owlery, he found what he was looking for: several black threads that had been caught on a loose nail about three feet above the floor as the boy's robe was snagged and ripped.

"Hmm," he said as he considered the evidence. "Obviously, this is quite suggestive, wouldn't you agree, Auror Potter?" he asked with deceptive politeness. James stared back and forth between his boss and the threads caught on the nail. He opened his mouth as if to speak, and then closed it again. After a few seconds, Dumbledore finally rescued him.

"I believe what Rufus wishes us to note is that while the tear was at the hem of young Creevey's robes, the rip was caused by a nail at waist-height. I assume that Rufus wants us to follow his deduction that Creevey's attacker levitated him up the stairs and that he was actually petrified elsewhere."

"Indeed," said the Chief Auror. "But the question is ... why?"

Dumbledore considered the question. "Because if we knew where the petrification actually occurred, it would be a vital clue as to who was doing it and how."

Scrimgeour nodded sagely. "What do you think we should do with the boy, Albus? Take him to St. Mungo's? Or keep him here?"

Dumbledore sighed. "We might as well keep him in the Infirmary. I've already made inquiries at St. Mungo's, and they assure me that do not have sufficient reserves of refined Essence of Mandrake to make a Restorative Draught for any sum of money." He frowned. "And certainly not for a Muggleborn from a family of modest means," he muttered with a hint of anger under his breath.

He shook his head and pushed that thought aside. "In any case, if we are unable to secure Essence of Mandrake from some other source, the Mandrakes we're growing in the greenhouse here at Hogwarts will be fully grown in just a few months, though it pains me to see a young student deprived of almost half his First Year's schooling."

"Hmph. Personally, *I'll* be happy if that's *all* the pain we suffer from this nonsense. Albus, if we only have a few hours, we'd best get to it. May we use your office for interviews?"

"Of course," he replied.

James stiffened slightly. "Who will we be interviewing, sir," he said, his voice betraying his nervousness.

"Your *sons*, obviously, for a start. Jim first and then Harry. While you and I are doing that, the others will interview the Creevey boy's classmates to find out who saw him last and when."

"Sir, surely you don't think ..."

"Don't presume to tell me what I think, Potter! We'll interview the Potter Twins first to hopefully *eliminate them as suspects*. Or would you prefer to see a *Prophet* article in the morning about how the Ministry is trying to engage in a cover-up?"

James Potter sighed and then gave a salute before leaving. Scrimgeour watched him leave warily. "Not that we won't get that anyway what with a Senior Auror investigating crimes in which his own son is a suspect! Honestly, I'm almost looking forward to leaving the Auror Corps before any other Potter-related disasters crop up in my life."

"Yes, I read the formal announcement last week. Do you have any retirement plans yet, Rufus?"

Scrimgeour looked at Dumbledore speculatively. "I had a few ideas. I'd like to discuss one of them with you later, if it's convenient."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "I look forward to it."

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***Later ...***

When Jim Potter arrived at the gargoyle entrance to the Headmaster's Office (accompanied by Percy Weasley), his father was waiting for him bearing a grim expression.

"Dad?" the boy asked nervously.

"It's alright, son. Chief Auror Scrimgeour just wants to ask you a few questions. Just be honest with him and everything will be fine."

"Dad?" the boy started again. "You *know* I didn't have anything to do with this, right?"

"Of course, I know that, Jim," his father replied in a way Jim found completely unconvincing. "But you'll still have to answer these questions. That's just ... part of the process."

Jim stared intently at his father and then nodded before following him up the stairs. Once inside, he looked around the Headmaster's office anxiously. He'd had a few Occlumency lessons with Dumbledore including some training in calming his emotions, but mainly, he'd spent his time with the Headmaster *undoing* the damage wrought by Rookwood's cursed training manual. Despite the drama that accompanied his exposure as a Parselmouth, Jim felt better recently than he had in months, but all that progress seemed undone now by the fact that his father and his father's *boss* were interrogating him under suspicion of him being a dark wizard. He sat in the empty chair as Scrimgeour began to question him.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, what were your feelings when you saw Mr. Creevey's picture in the *Prophet* yesterday," inquired Rufus Scrimgeour.

Jim considered giving a neutral response, but decided against it because (a) he felt like he had nothing to hide and

(b) he knew enough about Scrimgeour to realize that he'd never be able to lie convincingly anyway.

"I ... was a bit upset. Actually, disappointed and hurt mainly, but also upset. Colin had been someone who really seemed to look up to me. Honestly, he looked up to me a bit too much, I think. Always following me around and taking my picture. And asking me questions about 'adventures' that I'd never actually had. But when I realized he'd sent a picture of me in to the *Prophet* to go along with that hatchet piece, it hurt my feelings to think that someone who'd called himself my 'biggest fan' had turned on me. But certainly not enough to where I'd try to hurt Colin. I haven't tried to hurt anyone, even though quite a few Gryffindors have tried to start fights with me in recent months."

"Do you count Cormac McLaggen among that group?" Scrimgeour asked.

"Cormac has been a jerk lately, but no more or less than half my house. But if I were really that mad at people calling me a 'dark wizard,' surely the last thing I'd do is use dark magic to attack them."

The interview continued for another five minutes with questions about Jim's movements during the time that McLaggen and Creevey were petrified. He'd had a partial alibi for the Creevey attack – there were brief periods where he was alone, and, after all, no one actually knew how the petrifications were accomplished or how long it would take. He had no alibi at all for the McLaggen attack. Finally, Jim was allowed to leave. But as he reached for the door, Scrimgeour called out to him.

"Oh, Mr. Potter, before you go, I did want to share one bit of news with you." He held up a crumpled letter, now opened,



and waved it. "At the time of his attack, Mr. Creevey was on his way to post a letter to the *Daily Prophet*. You might wish to know that it was a letter of complaint. It seems that Mr. Creevey did *not* give the newspaper permission to use any of his pictures, that he did not know how the paper came into possession of one of his photographs, and that he was very angry that the paper would use one of those photographs as part of a piece attacking you. It seems young Mr. Creevey was quite certain of your innocence."

Jim's eyes widened, and he gave a weak smile. "Thank you for sharing that, sir." He glanced over to James to see how his father reacted to that news, but the man's face was impassive. Then, he turned and made his way out of the room. At the base of the stairs, Percy Weasley was waiting to escort him back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry was with him.

"What are you doing here?" Jim asked his brother.

Harry shrugged. "Apparently, after you, I'm the second most likely person to be the Heir of Slytherin. If the villain isn't the Boy-Who-Lived gone bad, then it must be his evil Slytherin twin trying to frame him."

"Are you?" Jim asked warily. "Trying to frame me, that is?"

Harry laughed at how direct his brother was, as if that were the sort of thing he'd admit in front of a prefect. "Jim, for once I'm *not* your enemy. But I do agree that whoever is trying to frame you has done so very effectively."

"So you think I'm innocent," Jim said almost in relief.

"Yes, though I also think innocence isn't enough to keep someone out of Azkaban. I recommend you don't go anywhere without a reliable witness until ... well, possibly for the rest of your life."

Jim went very pale and swallowed painfully. Then, he left with Percy while an amused Harry ascended the staircase to Dumbledore's office. There, he was briefly interrogated by Scrimgeour, James Potter, and Dumbledore. He answered every question about his own movements efficiently but thoroughly, making it absolutely clear that he had a solid alibi for all of the petrification attacks.

"You know, Mr. Potter," Scrimgeour drawled, "some people might think that having a perfect alibi for multiple attacks is itself suspicious."

"Yes sir," Harry replied easily. "Mainly people who've read too many Muggle mystery novels. In the real world, an ironclad alibi is usually pretty strong evidence of innocence."

Scrimgeour barked out a laugh while James tensed, as if nervous over his Heir's impertinence in front of his superior.

"I suppose so. Anyway, since Dumbledore himself supports your alibi for the McLaggen attack, I concede the point. Moving on, what do you think about the possibility of your brother being the one responsible for the petrifications?"

"I think that's nonsense. Obviously, he's being framed."

"And on what evidence do you base that assumption, Mr. Potter?" the Chief Auror asked. "It's not as though you could really know your brother that well. I am aware of your upbringing." Behind him, James straightened up, and he shot his boss an angry glare. Harry pretended not to notice.

"I base it on my observations that Jim Potter is a twelve-year-old boy of only average intelligence and cunning," he

replied with a smile.

"Harry!" Dumbledore said in a reproving tone.

"I didn't mean it as an insult, sir, but as evidence. If Jim Potter were the Heir of Slytherin and also *an idiot*, he might punish people who had publicly annoyed him with petrification and then leave an 'Heir of Slytherin' calling card to draw attention to it. Similarly, if Jim were *exceptionally clever*, he might do the exact same thing, thinking that leaving an 'Heir of Slytherin' calling card was so over the top that it would be more likely to prove him innocent than incriminate him – although if that were the case, he *seriously* overestimated the intelligence of most of the students here." He glanced at Dumbledore. "Again, no offense intended, sir."

"None taken," Dumbledore replied with mild asperity.

Harry turned back to Scrimgeour. "I can imagine scenarios under which Jim was the Heir of Slytherin and was secretly the villain running around petrifying students. But I cannot imagine any scenario under which he would commit these crimes *the manner they've been taking place*. All of which tells me that *someone else* is trying to frame Jim..." Harry stopped in mid-sentence, and then his eyes narrowed. "But then, of course, you already *knew that*, didn't you, Chief Auror Scrimgeour?"

"Did I?" the man said with a faint smile. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, young man?"

"Your reputation precedes you, Chief Auror. Before you rose to a mainly political and administrative office, you were known as a very brilliant and effective investigator. You know perfectly well that Jim's innocent and that someone's framing him. *But* you also dislike our father, and pretending

that Jim's a viable suspect allows you to jerk James Potter around a bit."

There was dead silence in the room for several seconds. James looked back and forth from Harry to Scrimgeour as if he couldn't decide which one to be angry with. Finally, the Chief Auror laughed loudly and slapped his knee.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter. Have you considered the Auror Academy yourself? We need more clever people in the service. There's about to be a shortage of that, I think." After a few seconds, James realized he'd been insulted by his boss and turned red.

"Sir...!" he said angrily, but before he could continue, Scrimgeour silenced him with a glare and an upraised hand.

"Cool your burners, Potter. The boy's right. After interviewing them both, I am inclined to issue a public statement that our preliminary investigation indicates someone is attempting to frame Jim Potter as a way of damaging the reputation of the Boy-Who-Lived. That won't stop imbeciles from thinking that he's guilty anyway and that we're covering it up, but it's a start." He turned back to Harry. "So having concluded that it's a frame-job, who do *you* think is responsible?"

Harry shrugged. "No idea. But if I might offer a suggestion, it would be to find out what happened to Tom Riddle, Jr. and see if he had any descendants who might be at school now. I'm pretty sure he was the one behind the original Heir of Slytherin attacks back in 1943, and obviously someone must know how he did it to copy his style."

At that comment, Dumbledore very nearly choked on a lemon drop. "You think ... *Tom Riddle* was the Heir of

Slytherin?! The victims were all his friends, including the one who *died!*"

"Well, you yourself said that the death of Myrtle Warren was probably accidental, sir. The intention was merely to petrify her like all the other targeted Muggle-borns. And while it might have sucked to be petrified and miss months of class, the *practical effect* of the whole thing was to make the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs rally around their Muggle-born students while isolating the Slytherins, especially those from the more bigoted Pure-Blood families."

Dumbledore seemed genuinely amazed by the theory, which was itself amazing to the young Slytherin. Once again, Harry was forced to acknowledge that Snakes and Lions simply didn't think the same way.

"You're suggesting that the whole thing was done for the purpose of generating sympathy and support for other Muggle-born?" Dumbledore said.

Harry nodded. "Yes. Only the plan went wrong when Myrtle was accidentally killed. Tom panicked, especially when it seemed likely that the school would be shut down and he'd have to go back to a Muggle orphanage in London at the height of the Blitz, so he framed Hagrid because he knew that Headmaster Dippet would readily accept him as guilty."

"He *was* guilty!" interjected an elderly man in one of the paintings who Harry assumed was the aforementioned Armando Dippet. "Guilty of being an unspeakable *abomination!*"

"Armando, be silent!" Dumbledore said with unusual force. Harry was mildly surprised. He'd never actually seen the man angry, but then, he was known to have little truck with

bigotry. Meanwhile, Scrimgeour considered what Harry had said.

"Tom Riddle, eh? Interesting. It's certainly worth looking into." Scrimgeour smiled broadly. "Seriously, Mr. Potter, *have* you considered the Auror Academy after graduation?"

Harry coughed. "I'm ... twelve, sir. It's a bit early for me to think about careers advice. But I will definitely keep it in mind."

"See that you do. I think that's all."

Harry stood and nodded at the three men before leaving without a word to his father.

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Hours later, Harry made his way up to the Astronomy Tower. Despite the warning he'd given Jim earlier, the foolish boy had left Gryffindor Tower without an escort, thereby sending half the school into a panic over who "the Heir of Slytherin" would target next. Harry considered the matter for about twelve seconds and then knew immediately where his brother had gone and why. Once again, he was at the top of the Astronomy Tower, his favorite place for brooding.

"Honestly, Jim, *what did I say?* Don't go anywhere without a reliable witness as to your whereabouts! Are you just daring your enemy to strike again or what?"

Jim looked at his brother in surprise but then turned back to look out the window at the fading sunset. "It doesn't matter. I can't have a chaperone every second of my life. If nothing else, the Heir can strike while I'm in the dorm asleep, and I'll still get blamed. And even if nobody else gets

petrified, all it proves is that I wasn't able to petrify anyone while I was under guard so I *still* look guilty. If I'm gonna be treated like a monster whatever I do, I might as well get some peace and quiet whenever I can without people staring at me and whispering behind my back."

"Really?" said Harry sarcastically. "Is the Boy-Who-Lived so thin-skinned that he can't bear the thought of his groupies turning on him? I've been called a *freak* by the only family I ever knew since I was old enough to walk, and I haven't let it break me the way insults from the likes of Cormac McLaggen and Ron Weasley have you."

"Harry," Jim interrupted. "I know your life with the Dursleys was awful. I know that, and I'm sorry. But even when you were with them, did you ever have to deal with the idea that *everyone* hated you?"

Harry started to respond, but the words died on his lips. He knew *exactly* what it was like for everyone to hate him, but it wasn't exactly something over which he could bond with his twin. When he didn't respond, Jim resumed his forlorn survey of the school grounds. Harry moved over to the open window and looked out. It was a long way down.

"Jim? You're not planning on doing something ... *foolish* up here, are you?"

Jim snorted. "I'm not going to kill myself if that's what you mean. I'm not that pathetic."

"I never said you were *pathetic*, Jim. But you're ... in a dark place right now." The other boy didn't respond, so Harry continued. "Anyway, I don't know if anyone's mentioned it to you, but Scrimgeour said he plans to announce that you're not a suspect and that the DMLE believes someone's trying to frame you. Maybe that will help."

Jim looked up with a small measure of excitement, but then the light in his eyes died as quickly as it had arisen.

"Maybe," he said doubtfully before turning back to the window.

Harry signed and headed for the exit. But just before he could leave the room, Jim spoke again.

"Harry? As bad as your childhood with the Dursleys was, did you ever think maybe it ... made you stronger? And that the way I was raised was what made me ... weak?"

Harry hesitated before finally responding. "I think *strong* and *weak* are both just states of mind, Jim. You choose who and what you want to be. And if you don't like who and what you are, just choose again." Jim looked back at him in genuine surprise at his brother's philosophy. The two brothers made steady eye contact for several seconds before Harry finally turned and left the tower. At the base of the stairs sat Neville and Hermione who had come here at his request and were sitting on the floor of the corridor reviewing Transfiguration notes together. He thanked them both for staying near his brother before heading back to the dungeon, his thoughts still churning.

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Later that night in the Lair, Harry handed Theo a draft of a letter addressed to an extremely unexpected recipient. The other boy reviewed the letter before glaring at Harry in consternation.

"Why?" he asked almost angrily.

"Why would I write to Peter Pettigrew with suggestions on how to spin the fact that Jim is a Parselmouth? What reasons occur to you?" Harry smiled, and Theo narrowed his eyes in response.



"Hopefully *not* out of some thus far concealed brotherly affection," he said sarcastically, "but other than that, I'm drawing a complete blank." He paused before fixing Harry with a speculative gaze. "Do *you* know the real reason yourself? Have you examined your actions under Occlumency to determine whether you are acting out of reason or emotion?"

Harry had. He knew exactly what emotions were driving him to do this, and he had decided to do it anyway. Not that he'd share that realization with anyone else when he had a perfectly good pretext.

"Let's just say I'm running an experiment," Harry replied smugly.

"An ... experiment?"

"Yeah. You see, Muggles have this saying: What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object? I've decided to put it to the test. In this case, the irresistible force is Wizarding Britain's love of the Boy-Who-Lived, while the immovable object is over four centuries of bigotry towards Parselmouths."

Theo thought about that for a second, and then his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You're trying to use Jim to rehabilitate Parseltongue into social respectability?!"

Harry nodded proudly. "There's no way I can conceal my own Parseltongue forever. And since our good friend Peter Pettigrew is already set up to control Jim's public image, we might as well put him to use."

"Just be careful, Harry. We know how dangerous Pettigrew can be."

"Relax, Theo," said Harry confidently. "For once, Pettigrew will be on our side."

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The day after Colin was petrified, the story appeared in the *Daily Prophet*, along with an official interview with Rufus Scrimgeour in which he stated that they had no official suspects at this time, including Jim Potter who was asked about specifically. As he'd promised, Scrimgeour stated the DMLE's preliminary assessment that Jim was not responsible and was in fact the target of a deliberate effort at false incrimination. For the next several days, the Letters to the Editor page of the *Prophet* was full of comments from all across the political spectrum, some attacking Jim and accusing the DMLE of a coverup, others praising the boy and denouncing his detractors. The following week, the *Prophet* put out a "special edition" with a four-page insert containing an analysis of Jim's own personal history cast in glowing terms; the history of Parseltongue, at least as far as it was known in Britain; the gift's apparent positive benefits when used for healing purposes; and arguments from "noted experts" claiming that, as Harry had suggested, Jim had acquired the gift from You-Know-Who through "right of magical conquest" and that it was a sign of his victory over the Dark Lord rather than a negative consequence of it. Letters attacking Jim continued, but going forward, they were offset by an equal number in his favor, and in the Wizengamot, the proposal to add Parselmouths to the Conscription List was quietly withdrawn ... at least for the time being.

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***1 March 1993***  
***The Gryffindor Common Room***

"What's this supposed to be?" Ron asked quietly but angrily. He was holding up a book and glaring at Jim Potter.

"It's a copy of **Quidditch Through the Ages**, Ron," Jim replied. "By the way, happy birthday."

"What's your game, Potter? After everything we've been through, you expect me to believe that this is just a birthday present?"

Jim sighed and responded in a tired voice. "Alright, you've got me. That's how I've been petrifying people - by sending them cursed birthday presents. Even though it wasn't Cormac or Colin's birthday when they got petrified."

"Very funny," Ron replied angrily.

"It was just a birthday present, Ron. Nothing more and nothing sinister. A birthday present ... and also, I guess, my way of saying *sorry*."

Ron looked startled at that. "Sorry for what? For being a Parselmouth? For lying to us all?"

Jim studied Ron's face with a sad expression. "For lying to *you* in particular, Ron. You were my best friend, and I kept something important about myself from you because I was ashamed of it and afraid of how you'd react if you knew. I should have trusted you with the truth last summer. I'm sorry and ... and I miss my friend."

Unreadable emotions clouded Ron's face for several seconds before finally resolving themselves into a cold sneer. "Tough," he said before dropping the book at Jim's feet and storming off. Jim shook his head and picked the birthday present up off the floor.

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**18 April 1993**  
**The Defense Classroom**  
**8:00 p.m.**

Due to an extremely busy schedule with his other research groups and the Dueling Club (which still met every other week), Lockhart was unable to schedule a meeting with Team Mysterio until mid-April. During the intervening two months, there were no more petrifications, and the school's anger at and fear of Jim Potter had settled down to a general disdain. Even Ron stopped openly accusing the Boy-Who-Lived of being the Heir of Slytherin in favor of vague insinuations that he was "going dark."

Harry and Ginny entered the classroom to find that Lockhart and the rest of Team Mysterioso were already there. Once everyone was present, the professor sealed the room with a truly impressive number of privacy and locking spells as everyone took a seat around the table. While Lockhart was casting his spells, Penelope at his direction was retrieving his pensieve from a cabinet. Harry had been surprised to learn that the pensieve Lockhart used in many of his lectures (most notably in the one about werewolves) belonged to his family. He knew little about pensieves but was well aware of how rare and expensive they were. Unlike Harry's black one, Lockhart's pensieve was a pearly white and apparently lacked shrinking charms. Halfway over, the cumbersome thing slipped from Penelope's hands and fell to the floor. She looked up at the Professor with a mortified expression.

"Please do be careful, Miss Clearwater," Lockhart said mildly.

"I am *sooo* sorry, Professor," she said apologetically.

"My dear Miss Clearwater, a pensieve is nearly indestructible. Your best Blasting Hex wouldn't even chip it in the slightest. I was worried mainly about you dropping it on your foot, which I think would hurt like the blazes. I don't think I'm insured for that sort of mishap, *ha-Ha!*" The embarrassed prefect picked up the dish and brought it over to the table.

"Welcome, team," Lockhart said addressing the group. "Now before we begin, I'd like to make some things clear. I have already extracted Miss Lovegood's memory of her mother's unfortunate demise, but at her request I have not reviewed it myself yet. Miss Lovegood was ... insistent that the rest of Team Mysterioso plus Mr. Potter should all review the scene together. *However*, I'm afraid I must insist on a condition of my own - namely, that each of you swear an Unbreakable Vow that you will not reveal anything you see in the memory or that we discuss in our subsequent debriefing without Miss Lovegood's consent."

"An *Unbreakable Vow*?" exclaimed a scandalized Penelope Clearwater. "That's a bit extreme, isn't it?"

"Miss Clearwater, we do not know what we're about to witness beyond the fact that it represents the final moments in the life of Pandora Lovegood, an event we suspect might be related to Miss Lovegood's apparently unique supernatural perception. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that we are about to witness the commission of one or more *crimes*. As such, I feel that I have an obligation to protect Miss Lovegood from any negative consequences that might arise from our viewing this memory. If it turns out that the memory is innocuous, she can always release you from the Vow immediately after our meeting ends. If it is *not* innocuous, it's quite possible that you may one day be thankful for the protections that the Vow will

afford *you* against anyone who seeks to recover that information from your minds." He hesitated. "And also, I must confess that the Vow is for my own protection as well. To be honest, I don't think the Headmaster would approve *at all* of my allowing students to review a memory in which someone *dies*. We're nearing the end of my contract, and I have no wish to be sacked with just a few months to go."

The five students all considered that carefully. "Oh well," Penelope said with a shrug, "being a Ravenclaw is all about the quest for knowledge I guess." The others for whatever reasons of their own also agreed, and so with Gilderoy Lockhart as the bonder, everyone swore an oath to Luna on their magic and lives that they would never reveal whatever they learned from reviewing her memory without her consent. Then, after Lockhart told them how, the four students (Luna herself had no wish to see the memory again) followed him into the pensieve.

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The basement was moderately-sized and had been retrofitted to serve as a laboratory. Crude hand-drawn protective runes covered the walls and door. Near the door there was a large table upon which lay pages and pages of rune sequences, arithmancy equations, and various other writings. Nearby, there was an eight-year-old Luna sitting peacefully on the floor playing with her dolls. A large open space had been cleared away, leaving an open area where Pandora Lovegood was painstakingly carving still more runes into the wooden floor with a strange curved blade, muttering softly to herself as she worked. Penelope identified the language with a whisper as being mostly Elder Futhark.

"There's no need to whisper, Miss Clearwater," said Lockhart, though his own voice was softer than his usual bombast. "Being nothing but the shades of times past, they cannot hear us talk."

Hermione and Ginny moved over to examine the desk. Both of them felt a pang of sadness at the sight of the little girl who played happily with no idea of how her life was about to change for the worse. Then, Hermione noticed the various papers on the desk. She could not move them for they were ephemeral to her touch, but she could read the ones on top. She frowned.

"Professor, how accurate are these memories? Surely Luna can't remember with perfect recall everything that's written here."

"Pensieves, Miss Granger, are peculiar things. We don't rightly know how they work, as there's only one magical village in Africa where they're produced ... at a rate of one every *ten years*, which is why they're not more common. The village in question, naturally, guards the secrets of its techniques zealously. What we *do* know is that pensieves somehow operate at the intersection of mind-magic and time-magic. The pensieve uses the inserted memory to track its way back through time to create a highly accurate vision of the place and period depicted therein, one which is in many ways more accurate than the original memory. For example, it is possible to review the memories of a deaf man and actually hear words uttered in his presence that he himself could not have heard. It is also possible to review the memories of someone who was blindfolded and see things that he himself was prevented from actually seeing, and, of course, it's no problem at all to examine someone's memory and review people and events that the person wasn't even paying attention to at the time. The only

exception is when the donor's memories have been altered through Obliviation or Occlumency, though in the former situation, the alterations are readily apparent in a pensieve. For the purposes of this excursion, you may assume that everything you see is exactly as it was at the time in question."

Hermione absorbed that before resuming her study of the desk and its contents. Meanwhile, Harry and Penelope moved over to where Pandora Lovegood was working.

"Penelope," Harry asked, "is this ... *normal* runeworking?"

"No, it's not," she answered. "Honestly, I've never *heard* of someone combining runes like this. And certainly never just carving them into the floor like this! It's ... bizarre!"

"I'm not surprised," said Harry. "Look at her!" As Harry pointed out, Pandora Lovegood seemed in obvious distress as she worked. Her hair was disheveled, she looked as though she hadn't slept in days, and it was obvious that she'd been crying. Indeed, as they watched, she looked up and over at her daughter who was still playing quietly and then she sniffled and wiped away tears with a sleeve. In all honesty, Harry thought the woman's demeanor hinted at some form of insanity. Lockhart also noted the woman's appearance before turning his attention to the runs on the floor. They seemed to be in a crude circular pattern, with room for Pandora herself to sit in the center. Suddenly, Lockhart felt extremely uneasy about the scene they were all witnessing.

"Miss Clearwater, what can you tell me about these runes? I must confess that I dropped the class after OWLs. It wasn't my cup of tea."



The girl shook her head. "I don't know *what* she's trying to accomplish here, sir. There's not any obvious thematic link tying the runes together. Just what appear to be random repetitions of Ansuz, Naudiz, Sowilo, and Ear from the Elder Futhark rune chart, along with a few other symbols from entirely different languages that I haven't studied thrown in for good measure."

"Any ideas on what they all might mean together?"

She studied the runes for a few seconds before shaking her head. "Not in this context, Professor. If I had to guess, I'd say the Futhark runes were meant to invoke the concepts of the World, Need, Power ... and Death. But that's *just* a guess."

"Professor, we found something," said Ginny in a shaky voice. She was pointing at a letter off to the side of the desk partially buried under pages of Arithmancy which had been scrawled in a nervous chicken-scratch handwriting. Most of the letter was covered up, but what *was* visible was the letterhead at the top which said "*From the Desk of Saul Croaker, Voice of the Unspeakables.*"

"I've heard of the Unspeakables," said Harry. "Though I'm still not clear on who they are or what they do."

"They're, um, a division of the Ministry," said Ginny who was obviously nervous to discuss the issue. "They run the Department of Mysteries and do research into areas of magic that are forbidden for normal witches and wizards. My father talked about them some, although Mum got mad at him whenever he mentioned the topic in front of any of us kids. He left the impression that they were ... scary." She swallowed and looked around at the group. "Also, and I

hope this is just a coincidence, but Croaker was Pandora Lovegood's maiden name."

"That *is indeed* interesting, Miss Weasley. It might also interest you all to know that the Voice of the Unspeakable is the only member of that organization whose name is publicly known, as he is the public spokesman for the group as his title implies. The rest all undergo rituals to occlude their identities from both memory and history. Or so the rumors say, at least."

Lockhart glanced back towards Pandora Croaker Lovegood and saw that whatever runework she was doing would be done in just a few minutes. After considering the matter, Lockhart seemed to come to a decision, as he drew his wand and placed it over the papers covering the letter from Saul Croaker.

"It's a good thing you've all taken an Unbreakable Vow," he said, "because I'm *not* supposed to be able to do this. **OBLIVIATE.**" To everyone's surprise, the spell caused the obscuring papers to vanish.

"Did you just erase some of Luna's memories?!" Harry asked somewhat testily.

"Technically and only temporarily. The memory will revert to its default condition when we leave. It's a cheat of sorts that lets you see things in pensieve memories that would normally be hidden by other objects. Now quickly, let us examine Croaker's missive." And the five investigators crowded around the desk to do just that.

***FROM THE DESK OF SAUL CROAKER, VOICE OF THE  
UNSPEAKABLES***

*My dearest Pandora,*

*Sending you this letter pains me more than I can say, but the signs are unmistakable. It is now clear that your daughter, my granddaughter, shares your mother's gift, the one which mercifully skipped your generation. Luna is a Heliopath, both blessed and cursed with the power to see into the astral realms and perceive that which dwells in those strange domains which rest both atop and within our own. I would give anything to conceal Luna's status, my child. You know that. But you also know that I am an Unspeakable, and I have oaths that I must fulfill. Moreover, Luna is not just a Heliopath. Since your mother's death, she is also the only Heliopath known to exist in Wizarding Britain today. Her powers represent a matter of national security, and it is simply not possible for me to cover for you or her any further.*

*I will come for Luna on the first of the month. Please take the time between now and then to prepare Luna for what's to come and to enjoy the remaining time you have together. Once she has entered training with the Unspeakables, you will not see her again for a long time, if ever. I wish it could be some other way, but my hands are bound in this matter. Please forgive me.*

*Your loving father*

"What's a Heliopath?" asked Harry in confusion.

"Well, according to Luna," said Hermione, "it's an equine fire spirit that burns everything it touches. She says Minister Fudge has an army of them at his disposal. I'm guessing she's wrong about that."

"Indeed," said Lockhart in a grim voice.

"Sir?" asked Harry.

The man hesitated. Then, he glanced back towards Pandora Lovegood, who seemed nearly done with her carving.

"Students, I haven't been *completely* honest with you or Miss Lovegood about the goal of this team. You see, there was one piece of information in my old CoMC text that I didn't share. The book described nargles and wrackspurts in general terms, but it also said that if you encounter someone who claims to be able to see such creatures, you should immediately report them to the Ministry, as such individuals are referred to as Heliopaths and are on the Conscription List."

"The *what?*" asked Ginny.

"The Conscription List," explained Harry. "It's a list of magical talents that don't require either a wand or a spell to use. If you have one of the talents on the list, and usually you're born with them, then ... you basically get drafted to work for the Ministry whether you want to or not. My tutor, Nymphadora Tonks, is a metamorphmagus who had to register when she was a child. It helped her get into the Auror Academy, but she never really had a choice about working for the Ministry in some capacity." He turned to Lockhart somewhat angrily. "So what is a Heliopath and why is it so important that it leads to conscription for someone as young as *eight?*"

"To be honest, I'm still not completely certain, Mr. Potter. If I ever knew before this year, my memories were erased along with everyone else's. What little I know comes from a few paragraphs in an old textbook and what I just read from Croaker's letter. I know that the term has nothing to do with the sun or with flames. Rather, it comes from Dmitri Helios, a Greek wizard who documented the phenomenon in the 14th century and somewhat fatuously named it after himself. I *deduce* that Heliopathy allows one to perceive the

Astral Plane and the creatures which exist there, creatures which apparently are superimposed over our dimension and which interact with us by reacting to our emotional states. As for why that's so useful for the Ministry, my *conjecture* is that if Miss Lovegood can accurately perceive how our emotions affect the astral creatures that only she can see, then probably no amount of Occlumency could prevent her from reading emotions and telling truth from lie."

Harry's eyes widened. That *would* be incredibly useful for the Ministry by itself, though he personally suspected there might be *a lot* more Luna would be able to do with her powers once she understood them. Which just left the question – why did everyone forget all about the matter? And as if in answer to that question, Harry and the others suddenly noticed that Pandora Lovegood had stopped inscribing runes and was now chanting softly. The group moved closer so as to hear her words.

"As I will it, so mote it be," she said in a ragged voice. "As I will it, so mote it be. As I will it, so mote it be."

Harry looked over at his fellow students, all of whom were as nonplussed as he. While the ritual phrase "so mote it be" was often incorporated into vows and oaths, this was *not* how spells were supposed to be performed according to everything Hogwarts had taught them about magic. The boy was surprised by how ... *unnatural* he found the scene.

"Let Heliopathy be forgotten. So mote it be. Let the *word* Heliopath be forgotten. So mote it be. Let all who knew of the powers of the Heliopath *forget*. So mote it be. Let all evidence of the Heliopaths be stricken and erased. So mote it be."

As the woman droned on and on, Harry looked around the room wildly. His sensation of unease had blossomed into one of mounting dread and fear despite his best efforts to Occlude. All of his mental barriers were being overcome by a new and frightening certainty that *something was coming* in response to Pandora Lovegood's call. Something *alien* and *taboo* and *wrong*. But above all, something with power completely beyond Harry's understanding. And with every word the witch uttered, that something drew ever nearer.

"Let the Unspeakables forget about Heliopathy and about my Luna's gifts. So mote it be. Let the Ministry forget about Heliopathy and my Luna's gifts. So mote it be. Let my Luna grow up free from those who would fear her and use her. So mote it be."

Harry felt a sudden sharp pain in his hand. He looked down and realized that Hermione had grabbed his hand and now held it in a death-grip, her face now unnaturally pale. Ginny was transfixed by the scene and stared unblinkingly at Pandora as her voice rose ever louder and harsher. Penelope kept looking about the room as if afraid something blasphemous would crawl through the walls. And gradually, all of them became aware of a discordant humming sound that grew louder and louder with each word Pandora Lovegood spoke. From outside the door, Harry could hear a banging noise and the sound of Xenophilius Lovegood yelling for his wife, but that was soon barely audible over the fiendish humming.

"Give me what I ask for, and in return, take my magic! Every drop!" The woman hesitated and her voice broke slightly when she continued. "And if that be not enough ... *then take what you will!* So mote it be!"

With those words, Harry struggled not to panic. The humming was now painfully loud, and the feeling that something inconceivable was coming had been replaced with the certainty that it was here all around them. He turned to ask Lockhart what was going on and did a double-take. For Gilderoy Lockhart – Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, Defeater of the Bandon Banshee, the man who had hunted the Wagga Wagga Werewolves to extinction – *was rigid with terror!*

"Let our bargain be struck!" Pandora shouted over the deafening angry hum that to Harry was like a *million* doxies swarming all around him. "So mote it be! So mote it be! SO MOTE IT BE!" As she cried out, Harry watched in horror as teardrops of blood began to pour from her eyes. Finally, she took a painfully deep breathe and screamed. "**IMAGO DEI!**"

With that, Lockhart matched her scream with one of his own. "**NOOOOOOOOO!**" Simultaneously, he pulled his wand and whirled it wildly overhead. Instantly, Harry and the other students felt a powerful force pick them up off the ground, even as Pandora Lovegood began to scream in agony. The next thing any of them knew, they were skidding across the floor of the DADA classroom away from the pensieve. But despite the change of circumstance, the alien humming was still growing in power. Instantly, Lockhart jumped back up to his feet and pointed his wand at the pensieve which was violently shaking in response to the awful sound that was emanating from within it. "**PROTEGO MAXIMUS!**" he cried out.

A powerful radiant shield manifested around the table and the pensieve sitting on it. Immediately, Lockhart cried out in pain, and after a few seconds, a small rivulet of blood trickled out of his left nostril. "Potter!" he cried out. Shaking

off his surprise, Harry popped his own wand and added his own Protego to Lockhart's. He too cried out in pain from whatever unearthly force it was that wanted to burst its way out of Luna's memory and into the real world. Seconds later, Hermione and Penelope each added their own Protego shields to the first two, while Ginny protectively hugged a terrified Luna. Finally, after what seemed like forever but was actually no more than ten seconds, the humming subsided. Harry and the others allowed their shields to lapse, and then all of them gasped in shock. There, on the table, were the remains of Lockhart's supposedly indestructible pensieve, now shattered into a half-dozen fragments. The man sighed and wiped the blood from under his nose.

"Well, it's a good thing Mother wasn't here to see this. She'd have a conniption!"

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Five minutes later, the members of Team Mysterioso were back around the table which had been cleared of pensieve fragments and which now held several mugs of hot chocolate and a bowl of candy bars which the Professor had been urging his students to eat in order to revive their spirits.

"We will discuss these matters now, and then we will not discuss them again," he said firmly. "Team Mysterioso is done. You will each earn a perfect 100% for your efforts on this team and will be excused from writing a paper at the end of term. That does not apply to you, Mr. Potter, as you will still be expected to write a paper on the Patronus Charm unless you succeed in manifesting a corporeal one, in which case you too will be excused. I assure you, however, that your paper will be graded leniently in light of your assistance tonight. But after you leave this room, *you*



*will not even think about that you saw in the memory*, not if you know what's good for you. I would never have allowed you to witness the memory if I'd known that Miss Lovegood's mother was going to use" he hesitated and grimaced "*that spell*."

"Professor," inquired Hermione, "just what is ... Imago Dei. I mean, I know it literally means '*Image of God*,' but why does that mean?"

Lockhart rubbed his forehead in frustration. "First of all, please refer to *that spell* as *that spell* and not by its given name. *That spell's* name is dangerous, students. Say those two words in front of the wrong people, and you risk being deemed to dangerous even to be allowed to rot in Azkaban!"

"You make ... *that spell* sound worse than an Unforgivable, sir," said Penelope in surprise.

"To our government, Miss Clearwater, it is," he replied after taking a sip of hot chocolate.

"*Those even suspected of summoning Wild Magic are simply flung through the Veil of Death*," Harry said softly as he remembered the Countess Zabini's words about the dangers of discussing forbidden magic. Lockhart's head jerked in his direction, and the older man frowned in annoyance.

"Has anyone ever told you, Mr. Potter, that you are *dangerously* well-informed?" he said irritably.

"Not ... in those particular words, but I take your meaning," Harry replied.

"So once again, what is ... *that spell*?" asked Ginny with some irritation. "Is it like a Memory Charm only with a global reach?"

Lockhart laughed as if with a mild delirium. "Oh no, Miss Weasley, it's not a Memory Charm."

"Well then," Luna asked with a sob, "what *does* it do? What could it possibly do that was worth my mother's life?"

He sighed as if mentally drained. "It does ... *whatever you want it to*, Miss Lovegood."

"I don't understand," said Penelope. "Every spell has a design matrix that sets its parameters. Every Charm does one thing. Sometimes, that one thing can be pretty broadly defined, but ultimately every Charm does one thing and one thing only. What do you mean Imago Dei does '*whatever you want*'?"

"I meant what I said, Miss Clearwater. Imago Dei ... has no limiting parameters. You describe as clearly as possible the outcome you want. You articulate what you're willing to sacrifice to get it. And apparently, you say '*so mote it be*' a lot. And if Magic judges your proposed sacrifice worthy of what you've demanded, then the spell will *reorder Reality itself* according to your specified outcome. *If not*, then the spell will fail ... or possibly it will take something else it considers sufficient and grant your request anyway. Or perhaps provide a suitably ironic variation on your request. The legends vary."

Hermione was confused. "But why is it such a secret? If there's a spell so versatile that it can do potentially anything, why is the Ministry, according to you, willing to kill to conceal it?"

Lockhart took a deep breath and exhaled. "Miss Granger, I'm not a devotee of Muggle fiction, but are there not Muggle stories in which a character is gifted with one or more magical wishes or the equivalent only to destroy himself when he uses that gift unwisely?"

She thought for an instant and then nodded. "I know there's a short story about a cursed monkey's paw. It give you three wishes, but it would always twist your intentions so that your wish is granted in a way you didn't want. Wish for money, and it comes in the form of a death benefit after your son is brutally killed in a workplace accident. That sort of thing."

"Precisely. Now imagine that story except that the monkey's paw doesn't stop at three wishes. Instead, you can potentially make an infinite number of wishes until one finally kills you due to bad phrasing on your part. Imagine *also* that in addition to yourself, there are thousands, possibly millions of people who each have monkey paws of their own."

The students sat aghast at Lockhart's description. "It would tear the world apart," said Harry in a horrified awe.

"Quite so," said Lockhart. "Imago Dei is one of a very small number of spells which are considered to be so dangerous to the entire world that anyone believed capable of casting them is marked for death. You may recall that last term during my rather infamous rant about dark and light magic, I mentioned in passing the Anathema Codex. Imago Dei is one of the forbidden spells listed therein. *Never mention what you know about that spell!*"

Shaken by their experiences and by Lockhart's intensity, the students all acquiesced.

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After answering a few final questions, Lockhart sent the students to their dorms for the night. Troubled by their experiences, each of them had difficulty falling asleep. Hermione had the greatest difficulty, for there was something tickling her brain, some detail which she knew was important but failed to notice when it mattered. Finally, as sleep overtook her, she let the thought go and would not remember it again for quite some time – the image of the Sowilo rune which was thoroughly integrated into Pandora Lovegood's forbidden ritual, along with the haunting, nagging feeling that she'd seen the lightning-shaped rune of power somewhere else before.

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: I'm almost starting to feel bad for James Potter's seemingly neverending Humiliation Conga. And it's going to get worse before it ever gets better. Speaking of James, I've decided to recast the role because none of the three actors who played him at any stage of his life in the movies look the least bit like they could be the father of Daniel Radcliffe. Adrian Rawlins, in particular, couldn't pass for Harry Potter's dad if you saw him in a dark alley while wearing a ski mask. It doesn't help that he's at least ten years too old for the part, but then again, everyone who supposedly went to school in 1971 looks at least ten years too old for the part, so I guess that fits. Anyway, henceforth, the part of James Potter will be played by Jamie Dornan from "Fifty Shades of Grey," an actor who is good-lucking, has Potter hair, and somehow projects both charisma and complete obnoxiousness at the same time.

AN 2: There were at least half a dozen times when law enforcement officials should have been summoned to

the castle, and yet they never showed up prior to OotP, when they were only there as part of an ill-fated coup attempt. In fact, compare the number of people at a Hogwarts Quidditch match to the typical American Friday night football game where a dozen local cops will typically be posted for crowd control and to break up fights and hooliganism. Since the PoS-verse assumes that characters are not dumb unless they have good reason to be, I assume there is at least a semi-intelligent reason to never have the aurors show up - namely, four god-wizards set it up that way a thousand years ago, and no one's been able to fix it. Plus, it ties in with that tension that's always been there between Hogwarts and the Ministry (for example, they can arbitrarily strip Dumbledore of both his major political offices but can't force him out of Hogwarts until events conspire to make him confess to treason). This also explains how there could be any meaningful student resistance in Year 7 - although Voldemort effectively controlled Hogwarts, his actual control was limited to just three faculty members (one of whom was Snape who was secretly against him) plus students loyal to his cause.

AN 3: In a similar vein, why did McGonagall talk about "closing down Hogwart" in such apocalyptic terms unless it would have to be shut down for a lengthy period of time. The sensible thing would have been to send every student home for Easter break and then let the aurors scour the castle, but obviously that wasn't possible. Why not?

AN 4: You didn't think I'd drop a wonderful title like "Anathema Codex" (first mentioned back in Chapter 23 of TSE) and never pick it up again, did you?

# Slouching Towards Endgame

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 71: Slouching Towards the Endgame, Pt. 1

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***27 April 1993***

### ***Team Protector Meeting***

Marcus Flint had been justifiably proud of his first attempt at the Patronus Charm. The glowing sphere of silvery light he'd created was the best of anyone in the group ... until Neville Longbottom had blown him out of the water.

*"And the worst thing of all was - he didn't even gloat!"* thought Flint to himself ruefully. Truthfully, Neville was humble, conscientious, and dedicated, and Flint wondered how the *hell* he'd gotten into Gryffindor. Obviously, Longbottom would never have been Slytherin material, but Flint wished that he'd ended up in Hufflepuff instead of with the Lions. They might well have become friends.

The Slytherin prefect shook his head and turned his attention away from the other side of the DADA classroom, where Longbottom was once again wowing everyone with his giant silvery fog bank. However, the boy was still unable to take the next step and form a true corporeal Patronus. Since that first night, Marcus had been practicing the Charm like mad and was bent on completely mastering it before the precocious Gryffindor.

*"Keep your grades up and after you've passed your NEWTs come see me," Rufus Scrimgeour had said at Harry's birthday. "Your great-grandfather – Caractacus Flint, Old Ironside we used to call him – was a great mentor to me when I was just starting out. I should be honored to return the favor to his descendant."*

That (so far) was the single happiest memory of Marcus Flint's young life. It was the moment he realized that everything Harry had told him about his great-grandfather was true ... and also the moment when he first truly believed in the possibility of a future for himself beyond following his father's footsteps into drunkenness, thuggery, and most likely an early grave. He focused his mind on what Scrimgeour had said and on what the Chief Auror's words might mean for him. The Auror Academy. An honorable and well-respected position in the Ministry. A chance to make Great-Grandpa Ironside, in whatever afterlife he might have found, feel proud of his family name again. All of these things Marcus Flint focused on as he pointed his wand at the floor.

**"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"** A silvery fog flowed out of Flint's wand to cover an area only slightly smaller than Neville's. But Marcus wasn't satisfied. Instead, he pushed more and more of himself into the spell and focused harder on his memory of Scrimgeour's words. Beads of sweat popped on his forehead, and there was a soft crack as he grit his teeth hard enough to hurt. The fog expanded more and more before abruptly collapsing in on itself. And suddenly, to Marcus's amazement, there was a glowing silvery animal in front of him. Specifically, there was a medium-sized boar standing almost three-feet-tall at the shoulder and displaying sizeable tusks. Immediately, the others stopped what they were doing and stared in awe

until Harry and Neville finally started clapping and whistling. The others quickly joined in.

"Congratulations, Mr. Flint!" exclaimed Lockhart who was nearly bursting with pride. "And a boar, I see. Quite interesting. A symbol of courage and fierceness in battle, you know. They say boars pulled the chariots of the Norse gods Freyr and Freya, while in Greek myth, they were terrible monsters sent by the gods against champions like Hercules and Atalanta and allow them to prove their bravery. The Muggle King Richard III had a boar as his standard," Lockhart stopped and thought, "although perhaps he's not the best example to follow, *ha-Ha!*"

"Uh-huh," Flint said absently while he continued to stare at the Patronus as if afraid it would disappear.

"Have you thought of a name for it?" Lockhart asked.

The young man blinked. "A name, sir?"

"It's something of a tradition among those of us who can cast the complete spell. If you successfully produce a corporeal Patronus, you give it a name. One that speaks to the emotions that allowed you to summon it into existence."

Marcus studied the boar which looked as though it was studying him right back. The look it gave seemed to suggest that the boar was judging him for his act of summoning it into existence. While the final verdict wasn't in yet, it conditionally approved.

"Ironside," he said confidently. "His name is Ironside." With that pronouncement, Marcus suddenly noticed that he's knees were shaking, and as they started to buckle, Lockhart reached out to catch him. As Marcus lost focus, Ironside shimmered out of existence.



"Quite alright, Mr. Flint. That's to be expected." He turned to the rest of the group. "The Patronus Charm, like all esoteric spells, is in many ways like a muscle. It is not enough merely to learn the spell and perform it properly to achieve mastery. You must constantly work to maintain the proper mindset so that you can sustain the Patronus for longer and longer intervals before recasting. According to my research, no one has ever produced a Patronus under documented circumstances for longer than two minutes on a single casting, though there are tales of wizards and witches maintaining a Patronus for longer periods of time while in extreme danger such as when confronted by multiple Dementors or lethifolds."

Then, the man turned back towards Marcus, who was mopping sweat off his forehead. "And of course, summoning the Patronus is only the first step. There's also learning how to effectively send it into battle and how to use it to convey messages. So rest up for a few minutes, Mr. Flint, and then get back to work stretching those muscles! *ha-Ha!*"

Lockhart clapped Marcus on the shoulder. Marcus nodded and smiled, simultaneously exhausted and delirious at the thought of being one step closer to his future.

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## ***29 April 1993***

Jim Potter sat alone (as usual, these days) at a table on the second floor of the Library as he reviewed his Potions notes for the next day's class. Lavender had stopped running tutoring sessions for him, supposedly because she was too busy with her work for Lockhart. Jim suspected, however, she just didn't want to associate with him now that his dark secret was out. He had known from the start that she was only interested in him because of the possibility that he'd

provide a beneficial marriage prospect, something that was obviously was no longer the case. In retrospect, though, Jim realized that he'd been using her as well, offering her the role of Girlfriend-of-The-Boy-Who-Lived in exchange for her dropping out of Harry's study group and all simply as a way to annoy his brother. It was amazing now to think how petty he'd been as a firstie and no longer at all surprising to see karma coming back once again to bite him.

There was a soft cough from nearby, and Jim turned to see Cassius Warrington walking up. Jim pasted on a sincere-looking smile. Something about Warrington rubbed Jim the wrong way, but he had resolved to try being more open-minded towards the Snakes, and thus far Warrington had been nothing but civil to him.

"Good afternoon, Potter," he said. "I just wanted to let you know that our little dueling group is meeting tonight in the old ballroom on the third floor. We'd be delighted if you could join us."

"Thank you, Warrington, it's really kind of you to invite me. It's just ... well to be honest, with all this Heir of Slytherin business going on, I don't think it's wise to be seen with a group of upper year Slytherins studying advanced combat spells. I think it would probably just make people more suspicious of me. And likely more suspicious of your group as well."

"I understand," Warrington said with apparent sadness. "In times like these, a wise wizard keeps to his own counsel." Then, he nodded significantly.

Jim nodded back hesitantly as he did not, in fact, know what message Warrington's nod was meant to convey. Then, he had a sudden epiphany that both amazed and horrified him.

*"Does Warrington think I'm the Heir of Slytherin?! And if so, is that why he and his buddies have been acting so ... nice to me?!"*

"So, um," he said aloud and with some trepidation. "If you don't mind me asking ... who do the Slytherins think the Heir really is?"

The other boy laughed softly and then sat down next to Jim. "We have a diversity of opinions," he said pompously. "Some people think it's you. Others think it's your brother, and he's just trying to frame you. Still others think it's Draco Malfoy and that his current ... association with that Mu ... Muggleborn from Hufflepuff is meant to serve as both a distraction and an alibi."

Ignoring the slur that Warrington had narrowly avoided making, Jim turned and looked across the Library to the table where Draco Malfoy was sitting with Justin Finch-Fletchley. The Hufflepuff was pointing out things to Malfoy in what appeared to be a Muggle newspaper called *The Financial Times*. Draco looked up and made eye contact with him before frowning disdainfully and then turning his attention back to the paper.

"Why Malfoy?" Jim asked out of curiosity.

"There is, shall we say, some suspicion that his grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy, might have been the original Heir of Slytherin. Granted, there's no known connection between the House of Malfoy and the Founder's line, but some people think he found the Chamber of Secrets and simply called himself the Heir of Slytherin for philosophical reasons or perhaps simply as a diversion for some more subtle scheme. Certainly, Old Abraxas was a more likely Heir than *the groundskeeper*."

Jim did a double-take. "The ... groundskeeper?!"

"Oh, you didn't know?" Warrington said with a smile. "Well, let me fill you in on the whole story ... or at least as much of it as I've heard."

Warrington and the Boy-Who-Lived talked for quite some time about the Heir of Slytherin, as well as other matters. And before they were done, Jim finally decided that he might just join the Slytherin dueling group after all.

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## ***2 May 1993***

"Oh come on, Lavender, help a guy out!" Jim pleaded.

"For the last time, Jim. NO, I WILL NOT HELP YOU!" Lavender shouted in Jim's face loud enough for the whole Common Room to hear. As a dozen or more Gryffindors turned to stare at them, Jim started to blush.

"Fine, Lavender, forget I asked," he said irritably before heading up the stairs to his dorm room. Lavender looked after him as he departed, her anger fading into the rather sad expression she'd been wearing for weeks now. Among the Gryffindors, only Parvati knew that it was because her family's matriarch had written to her and forbade her from having any further dealings with "*that damnable Parselmouth*." And only Luna Lovegood knew how truly upset Lavender was over the matter and how much she'd come to genuinely care for Jim as a friend rather than as both a national icon and a profitable marriage prospect. Or at least that's what the older girl's nargles had indicated. Lavender sighed and walked across the room to drop down onto a couch next to Parvati and Hermione.

"What was that all about?" Parvati asked.

Lavender exhaled loudly. "Jim's just being ... stupid. Again."

"How so?" Hermione inquired.

"Well, he says he's been talking to Hagrid and '*some other people*' – though he won't say who – and he's now convinced that Draco Malfoy is the Heir of Slytherin. He says Draco's grandfather must have been the Heir who attacked all those Muggleborns back in 1943, and now Draco is just following in grandpa's footsteps."

"That's ridiculous," Hermione said dismissively. "The Malfoys aren't descended from Salazar Slytherin."

"I *know*, Hermione. I did *say* that Jim was being stupid!"

"Be that as it may," said Parvati, "what sort of help does he want from you because of it?"

Lavender looked around the room, but no one else was nearby except for Ron Weasley, who seemed engrossed in his reading. She gestured for the other two girls to lean in so she could whisper. "Well, you know that I've been working on Team Chameleon for Lockhart all year, right? Do either of you know what it is?"

"Something to do with potions, right?" Parvati responded. "I mean, you're on it, so it must be potions-related. And also chameleon-related, I suppose."

Lavender made a face at her friend's poor joke. "You could say that, I guess. He has us researching ways to identify someone under the effects of Polyjuice Potion. Well, by us, I mean the NEWT-level Potions students. The rest of us are spending all our time brewing the potion so that the upper years can have plenty of samples to experiment with."

"Polyjuice Potion!" exclaimed Hermione. "But that's a restricted potion!"

"SHHH!" hissed Lavender. She looked around the room, but no one seemed to notice, not even Ron who never looked up from his notebook. "He says he has Ministry approval, and anyway he keeps whatever we brew under lock and key."

"Still," said Hermione, "it's an incredibly difficult potion, isn't it? I can hardly imagine a Second Year even being able to brew it."

Lavender sniffed. "I'll have you know, Hermione, that Lockhart has said that my Polyjuice Potions are the best of anyone Fifth Year or below." At that, Hermione was suitably impressed with her fellow Gryffindor's skill.

"I'm sure that's totally wicked, Lav," Parvati jumped in, "but what does it have to do with Jim?"

Lavender sighed again. "He wants me to get him a vial or two of Polyjuice Potion so he can disguise himself as a Slytherin, slip into their Common Room, and get evidence that Draco Malfoy is the one who's been petrifying people."

The other two girls gaped. "That *is* stupid!" Parvati exclaimed.

"Yes, Parvati. That's why I said that. Twice."

With that, the three girls rose and left the Common Room for the supper. Behind them, only Ron remained in that corner of the room, still reading from his black notebook. After a few minutes, he began to rub his temples as if he were suffering from a migraine. Finally, he put the notebook away and headed upstairs.

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### ***Later that night ...***

Ron had just finished brushing his teeth when things went odd. He was alone in the dormitory bathroom already in his pajamas and robe and almost ready for bed. The boy leaned over the sink to spit and then straightened up ... and gasped. The reflection that looked back out at him from inside the mirror *wasn't his*. Granted, it *looked* like Ron's reflection, but the eyes were sharper and craftier and far more intense. And that *smile*. So much more charming and likeable than Ron's own smile, and yet something about it made the boy want to recoil from the sight of his own face. He stepped back ... and then froze as thoughts which were not his thoughts slithered effortlessly through his mind.

*\*\*\*Be calm. You are not afraid but curious. You trust me.\*\*\**

Immediately, Ron's face relaxed and he waited to see what the face in the mirror would do. In the corridors and alleyways of his mind, those foreign thoughts sought out memories of Jim Potter and of Slytherins, and whenever it found one, feelings of paranoia and dislike blossomed around them like a black rose. The Mirror-Ron studied his counterpart and then shook his head as if disappointed.

"I don't know why you're fighting me on this, Ron. You *know* what's at stake. You *know* Jim is the Heir of Slytherin. If you do this and pull it off, he'll be *gone*. Expelled from Hogwarts. He won't be able to hurt anyone again. And *you* will be the hero that saved everyone from him! What are you waiting for?"

Ron waved his hand in front of his face as if trying to bat away an insect that was harrying him. "I know he's the Heir ... probably. But ... this? I might get caught and get into real

trouble. And even if it works and Jim gets expelled... What if he's innocent?"

"How could you possibly think that the way he *lied* to us, Ron?"

*\*\*\*You feel betrayed. You feel jealous. You feel alone and unloved... except by me.\*\*\**

Mirror-Ron paused and studied his counterpart silently for a few seconds. There was ... an obstacle, one that was interfering with the ongoing refinement of the boy's emotional connections. Then, a memory rose to the forefront of Ron's mind, and Mirror-Ron suddenly grew angry.

"Really, Ronald?!" the reflection said angrily. "He gave you a present on your birthday and now you've gone all weak?! This is a future Dark Lord we're talking about! Perhaps Voldemort himself reborn!"

Ron didn't respond. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to look away from his own reflection. Mirror-Ron calmed down and studied the boy speculatively.

"No, it wasn't *just* the present, was it? But it did make you remember something else. Show me!"

The boy shook his head furiously and kept his eyes shut. Then, he *felt* it. The cold sensation of a snake slithering around *inside his brain*. The sudden nausea as his thoughts and emotions were poisoned and violated by psychic venom. The terrible obscene *hissing* that echoed down the corridors of his memories.

*\*\*\*Show. Me.\*\*\**



A second older memory surface. "Oh, yes," said Mirror-Ron contemptuously. "I see it now. It was last summer when you first went to Jim's house. When he praised you for being so *brave* and *loyal* and what a wonderful little Gryffindor you were! When you, *a mere boy*, actually promised to help Jim Potter *kill Voldemort!*" Mirror-Ron laughed cruelly and then grew serious. "Look at me, Ronald," he commanded in a harsh voice that didn't sound at all like Ron's own.

Ron shook his head and squeezed his eyes harder shut. The mind-snake hissed again.

\*\*\**Look. At. Me.*\*\*\*

Instantly and uncontrollably, Ron's eyes popped open. He gasped in terror. His reflection was no longer smiling but was instead a mask of hatred with eyes the color of fire. "No," Ron thought. "*The color of blood!*"

Mirror-Ron smiled again, but there was not even a pretense of warmth in it, just sheer malice. "So, you've finally gained a measure of resistance, have you, Ronald? No matter. I have my own ways of doing things now, little boy, and your assistance is no longer required. Now, forget about all this. It's only a bad dream. Forget it, and go back to sleep."

"No ... you're ... what *are you?!*" Ron gasped in disgust.

Mirror-Ron's face hardened, and the snake hissed again.

\*\*\**Sleep.*\*\*\*

The boy's eyes fluttered, and his knees buckled and gave way causing him to fall backwards towards the bathroom floor.

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**3 May 1993**  
***Just before dawn...***

Ron's eyes jerked open suddenly. His heart was racing, and he realized he must have been having a nightmare, though he couldn't really remember what it was about. Something to do with a mirror perhaps? "*Probably that stupid Mirror of Erised, I bet. That was pretty scary.*" Then, he looked down and saw to his surprise that he was lying on top of the covers of his bed, still with his robe and slippers on. "*Huh. I must have been more tired than I thought last night.*" He glanced over and saw that the first glimmer of sunrise was creeping in through the window. He sighed, kicked his slippers off, and crawled back under his covers.

"*Weird,*" he thought sleepily, "*to have slept the whole night through and still feel so tired.*"

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***Later at breakfast...***

Jim had just bitten into a sausage when the Head Boy came to inform him that his presence was required in the Headmaster's Office. "*Merlin, what now?!*" he thought to himself. Upon arrival, he saw that Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, and Lockhart were waiting for him with grim expressions. Idly, he wondered why his mother had not been invited. Perhaps he was finally in so much trouble for something that not even they could help him.

"Please have a seat, Jim," said Dumbledore in a tired voice.

"*Of course, he's tired,*" thought Jim miserably. "*It's got to be exhausting having to put up with all my screw-ups for a whole year.*"

"I'll get right to the point, Jim. Can you account for yourself between the hours of midnight and four a.m. this morning?"

He blinked in confusion and shook his head. "I only have one person who shares a room with me, sir, and Neville's a pretty heavy sleeper. Sir, what's this about...?" He froze and his eyes widened. "Was someone else *petrified*?!" he asked in a fearful voice.

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "No, Jim. While serious, the matter is not as dire as that. Do you recall a conversation you had yesterday afternoon with Miss Lavender Brown? One held in front of several witnesses and during which you asked her to *steal* one or more vials of Polyjuice Potion from Professor Lockhart's classroom?"

Jim felt his stomach clench. He knew Lavender had been indignant about his request, but for her to have ratted him out?! "Well, I hadn't actually thought we were in front of *witnesses*..." he said lamely.

"*Potter!*" exclaimed Professor McGonagall "This is *serious!*" Beside her Snape snorted contemptuously. Jim thought about the Headmaster's previous question.

"Sir? Was ... was some of the Polyjuice stolen from Team Chameleon's lab?" he asked nervously.

"Several vials, Potter," Snape said harshly. "Luckily, I suspect the culprit will be quickly found since we have a prime suspect with motive, opportunity, and a past history of thievery!"

Jim quailed at the reminder of the dark magic book he'd "stolen" from Borgin & Burkes the previous summer. Or more accurately, the fake memory of stealing the book his godfather had implanted with his consent the previous

November. All that trouble, and no one had ever even bothered to check his memories after he'd simply presented a confession! And *naturally*, Snape was ready and willing to use that confession to brand him a thief now.

"I didn't take any of the Polyjuice, Professor Snape!"

"*Of course* you did," the Potions Master spat.

"That's *exactly* the sort of chicanery I'd expect from a Potter."

"Oh come now, Severus," interjected Lockhart in a cheerful voice. "You'd hardly expect this sort of thing from the Slytherin Potter, would you?"

"He doesn't count!" Snape growled, and Lockhart laughed in response.

"Severus," Dumbledore said in a chiding voice. "You are here for your potions expertise, not to antagonize the boy because of his parentage. Please proceed."

"Proceed?" Jim practically squeaked. "Proceed with what?"

"There is a very simple spell, Potter," said Snape, "one that any competent potioneer would know. It will allow me to detect any trace elements of residual potions ingredients on you for up to twelve hours." Snape grinned evilly.

"Now, *show me your hands!*"

Jim gulped and looked towards McGonagall, but there was no support to be found there. Slowly, he pulled out his hands and held them out. Snape pulled out his wands and waved them over the boy's hands in a complex pattern, and in response, Jim's hands lit up with a kaleidoscope of multi-colored lights. Snape studied the lights eagerly but then frowned.

"Well, Severus?" McGonagall asked tartly.

"There ... are no signs of any of the most important components of the Polyjuice Potion," he said with obvious disappointment. Then, he whirled around to face Dumbledore. "But that is not conclusive. After all, he may not have handled the potion directly yet, and if it had been bottled properly, there would have been no chance for contamination. I recommend another search of his quarters, Headmaster."

Lockhart sighed loudly in obvious annoyance. "Or we could just get it over with here and now. Show me your wand, Potter,"

Surprised, Jim did as ordered, while Lockhart pulled out his own wand before touching the two tips together. "**PRIOR INCANTATO.**" There was a flash of light accompanied by what sounded like someone far away casting a Jelly-Legs Jinx followed by a succession of additional lights and the sounds of other curses and hexes and jinxes being cast. A few of them were upper-level and potentially dangerous spells, and Lockhart frowned in response while Jim licked his lips nervously. More spells followed out of Jim's wand, but none of them were nearly as troubling as those first few dozen. Finally, after nearly a minute, the display ended.

"Well, Headmaster," said the DADA instructor somewhat grimly. "While Mr. Potter seems to have been unusually *aggressive* last night, I am confident he was not involved in the theft. Or at least, not personally involved."

McGonagall looked relieved. "What was that spell, Gilderoy?" she asked curiously.

"Prior Incantato, Minerva," Dumbledore answered. "The Reverse-Spell Charm. It was added to the auror training

program several years after you left Ministry service. It can usually force a wand to reveal what spells have been cast with it within the last hour. It is quite impressive, Gilderoy, that you were able to use it to reveal what spells Jim had cast within the last *day*."

Lockhart smiled almost bashfully. "You flatter me, Headmaster. Just a little something I picked up in my travels."

"I should like to hear the story of how you did so, my boy," Dumbledore said with twinkling eyes, "since I was given to understand that the improved version of the spell is *only* taught to aurors."

"Well, Headmaster," Lockhart replied with a mischievous smile, "I actually *did* learn it from an auror, a Romanian auror to be precise. Lovely lass. I helped her out with a case, and in exchange, she taught me that spell ... and a few other skills that have been of use to me over the years." At that, the DADA professor stared off into the distance with an odd but fond expression on his face. Snape and McGonagall both looked mildly disgusted for reasons that Jim couldn't fathom on account of him only being twelve and not yet fully aware of the virtues of the opposite sex.

"If we could return to the matter at hand, Gilderoy," said Snape with obvious contempt, "what exactly was that display meant to prove?!"

"Merely that the boy could not possibly have been the one to abscond with the potions early this morning. I've been quite conscientious about Team Chameleon's output. Whoever stole the potions had to get through Colloportus Locking Charms placed on the door to the DADA classroom, the door to the side room where Team Chameleon was

doing its potions work, and the doors to the cabinet where the potions were stored. Except for myself, anyone who tried to reach those potions would have needed either an extremely high level lock-picking Charm which only a curse-breaker would likely know *or* an overpowered Alohomora. Now I suppose Jim could have done the last one – he's probably powerful enough despite his youth – but he could *not* have done so without whatever spell he used showing up under the Reverse-Spell Charm. Ergo, Jim Potter was not the one who stole the potions."

Jim relaxed at that ... until Lockhart turned back to him with a more pointed look. "And so, with that out of the way, we can turn to the unrelated but equally provocative question of *what exactly* Mr. Potter was doing last night that required the use of so many combat-related spells, at least three of which are so dangerous that they would be presumed dark magic in a court of law."

"Jim Potter!" McGonagall, who had finally started to relax for the first time since Jim had entered, practically shrieked in response to Lockhart's announcement. Snape looked predatory once again. Dumbledore merely gazed at the boy with a mild expression and his usual twinkling eyes.

Jim looked back and forth at the four teachers before he took a deep breath. "I wasn't fighting with anyone. Last night I was ... getting some dueling lessons."

"With spells like that, Potter?" spat Snape. "Who in this school would be so reckless as to teach a Second Year those?!"

The corner of Jim's mouth twitched. "It was mostly some of the upper year Slytherins, sir." Snape's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "They were concerned that I might need to

be able to defend myself if attacked and offered me some extra coaching. They were all very helpful, Professor Snape. I'm quite grateful for the concern and assistance your House has shown to me."

And while Jim was still only a novice Occlumens, he was very relieved that what little skill he had was enough to keep him from smirking at the look on Severus Snape's face.

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### ***That afternoon after Fourth Year DADA...***

"Mr. Weasley, a word?" Lockhart called out. As the other students filed out, George Weasley made his way to the instructor's desk. "Your wand, please?"

Nonplussed, George pulled out his wand, and Lockhart cast Prior Incantato on it, revealing all the spells the boy had cast within the last day, none of which were at all surprising or controversial.

"Sir?" he asked out of concern.

"As you might have heard, someone stole several vials of Polyjuice Potion last night. I was merely confirming that you have not cast any of the spells that could have been used to facilitate the theft.

George's eyes flashed angrily. "You thought it was *me*, sir?!"

"On the contrary, Mr. Weasley. I was supremely confident in your innocence. But I cannot look back farther than one day with Prior Incantato, so if I wished to serve as your alibi, I needed to cast it upon your wand as soon as possible." Lockhart put his wand away. "So now that we've established your shining innocence, tell me - how is Ancient Runes



treating you?" he asked, changing the topic. George hesitated.

"It's ... frustrating. Professor Babbling insists that I stick to '*acceptable standards of runic arrays*' which are, well, *boring*. I don't understand why I'm stuck using traditional arrays when the ones I've been using work better."

"Hmm. Ask me that again after you've graduated, Mr. Weasley. The answer might surprise you. Anyway, the goal now is to learn what you can from Professor Babbling and get good grades. Runic magic doesn't set off the Trace, so you can always experiment during the summer." Lockhart chuckled softly. "Right, *ha-ha!* As if you weren't going to do that anyway!" He turned more serious. "How is your brother Fred doing?"

"We owl each other regularly. He's still a bit down but working hard on his studies. He's hoping that he can pass his exams with self-study so he won't be held back a year."

"Well, send him my best regards. Now, before you go, I have something for you." Lockhart handed George a rolled up scroll. "This rune sequence is outside of the area you've been working on for the last few months – excellent work so far, by the way – but it might be something you can incorporate into it and so improve the effectiveness of your own ward-piercing scheme. Take a look and tell me what you think. *Please* be careful not to activate it as it's potentially," Lockhart coughed, "explosive."

George's eyes widened in surprise at the level of trust Lockhart was placing in him. "I'll be careful, sir. And thanks ... for everything."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Weasley," he replied before looking down at the exploding runes he'd just handed off to a notorious prankster. "*Please* don't mention it."

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***4 May 1993***  
***Just after lunch...***

As the Second Years left the Great Hall, Jim happened to walk out into the corridor alongside Justin Finch-Fletchley who did a double-take and swallowed hard. Almost immediately, Susan Bones, who was from an old Pureblooded family, moved in between the two as if to shield the Muggle-born. Jim noticed and shook his head.

"For Merlin's sake, guys, I'm not the Heir and I'm not going to petrify Justin or do anything else to him or anyone else."

"I know you won't, Jim," said Susan with a serious expression. "Because we Hufflepuffs look out for one another."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Whatever, Bones. Besides I thought Justin had Malfoy to watch out for him. He's more likely to be the Heir than I am."

"That's slander, Potter," Draco drawled from behind them. "Be careful. My family's lawyers are better than yours."

The group stopped in front of a painting of St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. "Typical, Malfoy. Always hiding behind your family's riches," Jim said.

Draco laughed. "I wasn't aware the Potters had been toiling away in poverty all these years. How many bedrooms does your manor house have again?"

"Say Potter," Susan interrupted. "You say you're not the Heir of Slytherin despite the fact that you *are* a Parselmouth. Why don't you use your Parseltongue to find out who *is* the Heir?"

Jim folded his arms. "And how am I supposed to do that, Bones?"

"Well, there are snakes in paintings all over this school, Potter. Why don't you talk with them and ask them what they know about the topic?" Next to Susan, Draco's eyes widened slightly. From Potter's reaction, it appeared that he'd never even tried talking to any artificial snakes, any one of which could have informed him that Harry was also a Parselmouth.

"Really, Miss Bones," Draco said with a deceptively easy laugh, "just because Potty here can talk to snakes doesn't mean that he can communicate with a *picture* of a snake! That would be ludicrous!"

"Yeah, Bones," Jim said. "I *highly* doubt that every single thing that looks like a snake can carry on a conversation in Parseltongue."

"Well," Susan replied defensively, "you'll never know if you don't even try."

"Fine, fine!" said Jim. He pushed his way past the other students to face the nearby painting. In the back of the group, an anxious Draco looked around for Harry or anyone else who might aid in causing a distraction. As Jim studied the painting, it seemed that most of the snakes depicted were too small and far away to focus on, but there was a large adder hanging from a tree near Saint Patrick's head. Jim studied the snake for a few seconds before looking around at the crowd that had gathered. Suddenly, he felt

oddly exposed as so many classmates who had been fearful of him for months now regarded him with curiosity.

The boy took a deep breath and focused his attention on the adder. Then, he *hissed*. Instantly, most of the students around him took a reflexive step away. The adder, however, was not impressed and did not respond or even move. Jim turned back towards the crowd.

"There. Satisfied?" Jim said irritably. He turned and headed on to class. As he left, Draco watched after him with an intense expression.

"I'll catch you up, Justin," said Draco. "I left something in my dorm room." With that, Draco turned and quickly left the scene, nearly bumping into Ron Weasley as he passed.

Just a few minutes later, Draco found Harry Potter in another corridor. "A word, Potter?" he whispered urgently to the surprised boy who followed him into a nearby boys' toilet.

"So, what's so important, Drake?" Harry said amiably.

Draco wrinkled his nose at the nickname. He was still ambivalent if not actively offended by it, but "Drake" had taken hold among the other Slytherin Quidditch players, and he feared he was stuck with it for the foreseeable future. Before responding, Draco set up privacy wards with a shaky hand.

"Harry," he said. "I just watched Jim Potter try to talk with that snake in the painting of the Muggle saint hanging in the main corridor near the east wing."

Harry was visibly concerned. "What, Proinsias?" he asked relating the Irish snake's proper name.

"If you say so," Draco replied irritably. "What's more important than the wretched thing's *name* is that *it wouldn't respond*. Harry, is there some ... trick to getting painting-snakes to respond to you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, they react just like living snakes once you begin paying proper attention to them." Then, his eyes widened in shock.

"What?" Draco asked in response to his reaction.

"There's nothing wrong with *me*," Harry said in wonderment. "My Parseltongue works *fine*. The problem is with the snakes of Hogwarts! Something is *preventing* them from responding!"

"But what could do that?!"

Harry drew a long shaky breath before responding. "Only one person I could think of," he said. "The Heir of Slytherin!"

"What?!" Draco exclaimed.

Harry shook his head. "We don't have time to explore this now. Get word to the others. We'll meet up in the Lair tonight and start brainstorming. The Heir of Slytherin now has my undivided attention!"

Draco nodded and headed for the door before Harry called out to him.

"Drake! Thanks for ... well, for letting me know about this so fast. I owe you."

Draco sniffed. "Don't worry, Potter. I'm sure I'll find some way for you to pay me back."

Unfortunately, when that night's meeting of Harry's Slytherin entourage was called to order, Draco was not there. Nor was Missy Bulstrode at first, and when she finally arrived, she was pale and visibly upset.

"Potter," she said in a breathless voice. "I'm afraid Malfoy won't be joining us."

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Draco Malfoy's petrified form lay on the ground, just a few feet away from that of Justin Finch-Fletchley. On the wall behind them was another message from the Heir.

**MUDBLOODS AND BLOOD TRAITORS ALIKE  
SHALL FEEL THE HEIR'S TERRIBLE VENGEANCE**

Nearby, several teachers were taking in the scene with horrified expressions, and McGonagall was consoling a weeping Pomona Sprout. Dumbledore, Lockhart and Snape were examining the petrified bodies together.

"Well," Lockhart said brightly, "on the bright side, I guess now we can eliminate Mr. Malfoy as a suspect."

Snape was not amused.

### Chapter End Notes

AN 1: The dialogue between Lavender and Hermione was just a small joke. In this continuity, Hermione considers Jim to be a casual friend and housemate instead of someone she's devoted to. At the same time, Hermione is less suspicious of Slytherins in general and Draco in particular. Accordingly, she never even once considered brewing Polyjuice in a disused lavatory in order to investigate the Slytherin Common Room, let alone going so far as to acquire the recipe and the

ingredients through larcenous means. Lacking any reason to brew the potion herself, she concludes that the formula is way too hard for a Second Year.

AN 2: I always thought that CoS and the canon-series in general really did Ginny a disservice by not showing any meaningful parts of her possession or any meaningful aftereffects so that we'd have an opportunity to see her as something other than a "silly little girl." Being possessed should be horrifying for the character and the reader alike.

# Slouching Towards End pt2

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 38: Slouching Towards the Endgame Pt 2

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***4 May 1993***

***8:30 p.m. in the Headmaster's Office***

"So what you are saying, Headmaster," Lucius Malfoy said in a voice that was equal measures of silk and steel, "if I understand you correctly, is that you have no idea who is responsible for petrifying my son nor even how it was accomplished?"

The Lord of House Malfoy and the Chairman of the Hogwarts Board of Governors sat in Dumbledore's office and regarded the older wizard calmly, speaking in the dulcet measured tone that only the best of Slytherin House could master. It was a tone that conveyed cold menace to the person being spoken to while generally sounding mild and polite to any non-Slytherins observing. In this case, that included the Minister of Magic who sat next to Malfoy and who was oblivious to the lethal fury masked by the calm demeanor of his most trusted advisor.

Also present in the room were Profs. Lockhart, Snape, and McGonagall, Chief Auror Scrimgeour, and Senior Auror Potter. Of those five, Snape and Scrimgeour were Slytherins and knew how to read Malfoy's subtext, while McGonagall and Potter simply knew the man's history well enough to assume malicious intent. For his part, Gilderoy Lockhart



bore a smile of bland amusement that gave away nothing of what he thought of Malfoy's words.

"Lucius," Dumbledore said with an equally deceptive calm, "let me assure you that we are investigating every avenue and considering every reasonable suspect."

"Is the Boy-Who-Lived among your 'reasonable suspects,' Dumbledore? I have followed his recent exploits in the *Prophet* with great interest." Fudge seemed scandalized by that suggestion, while James was incensed.

"Now see here...!" he started.

"No, Lord Malfoy, he is not a suspect," Scrimgeour interrupted testily while shooting a glare at his subordinate.

"Or at least no more than anyone else. I personally interviewed Jim Potter last February, and I was of the opinion then and remain convinced now that someone has been trying to frame him. As for your son and the Hufflepuff boy who was petrified alongside him, Jim has an alibi for most of the period from the time they were last seen until their petrified bodies were discovered. Of course, Jim doesn't have an alibi for that *entire* period, but while we don't know how the petrifications are being accomplished, I find it unlikely that it's something that can be done in mere moments by someone located on the other side of the school. On the other hand, we can't rule out the possibility that the petrifications are being done by some means that could be set in motion in advance while the perpetrator goes off to create an alibi, but if that's the case, any alibi would be meaningless and the perpetrator could be essentially anyone in the school." He smiled at Malfoy. "Excepting, naturally, those who have been petrified. At least *they're* in the clear."

"Do you know something, Chief Auror?" interjected Lockhart cheerfully. "I said *the exact same thing* when young Malfoy was discovered! Great minds and all that, what? *ha-Ha!*" Everyone simply stared at the man for several seconds until he coughed softly and adjusted his cravat. Lucius in particular gave Lockhart a withering look before turning his attention back to Dumbledore.

"Tell me, Headmaster. Are there at least prospects for *unpetrifying my son*? And the two Muggle-borns also petrified, I suppose?"

"Alas, Lucius. I am informed that there is simply no Essence of Mandrake to be had anywhere in Europe for any sum of money."

"We shall certainly see if that is true, Dumbledore. In the meantime, I expect this matter to be resolved immediately. Or else I shall bring it to the Board at the meeting scheduled for next week. I must say that in light of your complete lack of progress in this '*Heir of Slytherin*' business that has been percolating since *last November*, I'm beginning to wonder if you've ... lost your touch. I suspect a majority of the Board might well agree with me. Perhaps it's time for some ... new blood, as they say?"

"If you remove the Headmaster, the Muggle-borns at Hogwarts won't stand a chance!" exclaimed James Potter.

"Yes, that would be simply awful," Malfoy said blandly before turning to Minister Fudge. "Minister, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll take this opportunity to check in on my son. Hopefully, the infirmary is better run than the administrative offices."

"I quite understand, Lucius," Fudge stammered. "I... I'm sure young Draco will be alright. Just as I assure you I'll do

everything I can to procure that Essence of ... whatever as soon as possible. You have my word!"

"I am indeed grateful, Minister Fudge." Lucius bowed deeply and respectfully before taking one last glance at the others in the room. He did not bow (respectfully or otherwise) towards any of them before making his exit.

After the man left, Fudge exhaled and turned to the others. "Honestly, Albus, you must admit that this situation is intolerable. Why can't we just send in a few auror squads to search the castle from top to bottom and find out what's causing this?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Because, Cornelius, the school's inherent magic will not allow any significant number of Ministry personnel to remain on the grounds for more than a few hours per week to perform such a search."

"But *why*?!" the man asked in frustration.

"It's because of a magical treaty between Hogwarts and the Ministry dating back more than four centuries that guarantees the school's independence, Minister," said Scrimgeour. "One you should be cautious about challenging since, as Minister of Magic, you would bear the brunt of any assault if the castle decided we were intruders and you were present at the time."

The man sighed in irritation. "But surely there are exceptions for legitimate law enforcement operations?"

"I did find one possible exception," James Potter suddenly spoke up. "Murder investigations. If someone is killed on Hogwarts grounds, we're allowed to enter the grounds to investigate. Likewise, if there is a warrant for the arrest of someone on suspicion of murder who's hiding out here,

we're allowed to come onto the grounds in force to arrest them."

"And are either of those two exceptions remotely relevant to our current circumstances, Senior Auror Potter?" drawled Snape with obvious disdain.

Potter's lip twitched slightly. "Not at this time, Professor Snape. But you never know what's going to happen in the future."

"Indeed." Snape turned to face Dumbledore. "Headmaster, is my presence required any further? I have potions brewing."

Dumbledore gave the Potions Master leave to depart, while the others continued to review their options.

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Malfoy made his way towards the school's infirmary at a leisurely pace, mentally reviewing what he'd learned from the Headmaster. En route, he passed by the Library just as Jim Potter exited. Jim froze instantly upon seeing the man who he'd been told was a member of Voldemort's inner circle. Malfoy likewise paused upon seeing the Boy-Who-Lived before sauntering over to him.

"Well, well, well. Jim Potter, we meet at last. Your reputation proceeds you."

"As does yours, Mr. Malfoy," Jim said quietly.

Malfoy smiled and reached up with one gloved hand to brush aside Jim's messy hair revealing the distinctive V-shaped scar on his temple. Jim, refusing to show any fear of the Death Eater, fought down the urge to flinch away from his touch.

"Do forgive me," the man drawled. "Your scar is legendary. As was the wizard who gave it to you."

"Voldemort was nothing more than a murderer," Jim said through gritted teeth as he stared unflinchingly into Malfoy's eyes. The man twitched nearly imperceptibly at the mention of Voldemort's name, but then he smiled again.

"You must be very brave to mention his name. Or very foolish." Then, the smile melted away. "But hopefully not so foolish as to have harmed my son, Potter! For that crime, should you be found guilty of it, *boy*, the vengeance of the Dark Lord would be as nothing compared to *mine*!"

With one last sneer, Malfoy spun on his heels and strode away from Jim, who was left shocked by the realization that Lucius Malfoy suspected *him* instead of the other way round. Shaken, the boy headed off in the opposite direction. As Lucius rounded the nearby corner, he stopped short once again. Sitting on the bottom step of a nearby staircase was another boy he recognized, one so very much like Jim Potter yet so obviously different in bearing that the man knew he'd never mistake one for the other.

"I do apologize for eavesdropping, Mr. Malfoy," Harry said calmly, "but I didn't want to intrude. I must say though – it is *wise* to bodily threaten the Boy-Who-Lived?"

"Are you presenting yourself as a witness against me, Mr. Potter? I believe your father is still upstairs in the Headmaster's office if you wish to run and find him."

Harry shrugged. "I'm sure if Jim plans to report you, he can relay all the important details without my help." He turned and looked down the corridor. "Were you headed to the Infirmary to check on Draco, sir? I was headed that way myself to ask Madam Pomfrey if there was any change."

"I doubt that very much, Mr. Potter," Malfoy said bluntly. "However, if that is the excuse you wish to offer as cover for your obvious desire to speak with me, I shall do you the courtesy of pretending that it is true." With that, the wizard turned and headed off towards the Infirmary, his serpent-headed cane clicking along the stone floor. Harry fell easily into step beside him.

"My son has mentioned you, Harry Potter. He has described you as being one of his ... *friends*."

"I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Malfoy. While we both got off to a rocky start, I've grown quite fond of your son."

"Have you indeed, Mr. Potter? Obviously, you've come to know Draco quite well. Have you any thoughts on who is responsible for his condition?"

"I do. That's why I wanted to speak to you. I've already brought my suspicions to the attention of both the Headmaster and Chief Auror Scrimgeour, but I'm not sure they take the suggestions of a Second Year seriously. I had thought that someone with your resources – to say nothing of your personal interest in this matter – might pursue my theory more diligently than the Auror Corps."

Malfoy nodded, as if absorbing that. To Harry's surprise, the man seemed to be taking him seriously despite his youth. He was curious as to how exactly Draco had described him when talking to his parents.

"I am listening, Mr. Potter. Who is your suspect that your elders see fit to ignore?"

"By any chance, sir, are you familiar with the name *Tom Marvolo Riddle*?"

Lucius stopped in his tracks and looked down at Harry, his eyebrows rising fractionally. To most people, his actions would have reflected interest, perhaps even curiosity. But Harry Potter had spent most of the last two years studying under a master Occlumens and most his free time in the company of Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott. Moreover, while Lord Malfoy was himself an Occlumens of considerable skill, he had just been caught by surprise, allowing Harry to read volumes in his face. And what he read alarmed him, so much so that he reflexively employed a skill that he had been practicing but had not yet had call to use under a high pressure situation.

He dilated his perception and fixed his mind's gaze betwixt the beats of his heart.

***Thump ... Thump.***

As he activated the obscure skill he'd been trying to master since Christmas, Harry's internal thought processes suddenly sped up to a superhuman rate. Everything around the boy seemed to slow to a crawl, and instantly, he became preternaturally aware of the beating of his own heart, which from Harry's dilated perspective seemed to have slowed to a fraction of its normal rate.

*"A relatively large fraction, though," he thought to himself. "So I'd better get on with it. Obviously, Lucius Malfoy does know the name 'Tom Marvolo Riddle,' but he was not clearly expecting me to know it and is quite angry that I do. So tread very carefully, Harry Potter, and maybe we'll see where this goes without making the Big Bad Death Eater decide to kill us."*

***Thump ... Thump.*** Harry's heart beat once more as Malfoy opened his mouth to speak (still unnaturally slowly from the

boy's perspective). Harry allowed his technique to lapse slightly so that he could hear what the man had to say and respond appropriately.

"Tom ... Riddle, you say? The name sounds ... vaguely familiar, Mr. Potter, but I cannot say for certain that I recall it. What connection does this ... Riddle person have to the petrifications?"

**Thump ... Thump.** "He was a Slytherin back in the 1930's and 40's. A prefect who became Head Boy his last year." Harry hesitated for emphasis. "And I have reason to believe that he might have been the so-called Heir of Slytherin who was responsible for the petrifications that took place in 1943. I also suspect that the current Heir of Slytherin is someone connected to him, his offspring perhaps. But definitely someone who learned how he did it and is following in his footsteps."

Lucius crooked his head slightly, and his shoulders slumped the tiniest amount. **Thump ... Thump.** Time slowed down again as Harry thought about the man's reaction. "Wow. *Visible surprise. He was definitely not expecting that response. So he knows something about Tom Riddle that he considers a dangerous secret, and it's not the fact that he was the Heir of Slytherin. I wish Luna was here. I wonder what his nargles look like.*" **Thump ... Thump.**

Malfoy nodded slowly. "An intriguing supposition, Mr. Potter. Very well, I shall make some inquiries regarding this ... Tom Riddle. Thank you for bringing him to my attention. It may well prove to be *invaluable* information." He paused. "Do you still wish to visit Draco in the Infirmary? I have already seen through your pretense, after all."



Harry smiled politely while ending his dilation after the fifth heartbeat. "It is late, I suppose. Perhaps it would be best if I turned in. I wouldn't want to be out after curfew."

"Indeed. Do be careful, Mr. Potter, as you head back to the dungeons. There *is* a petrifying lunatic about, after all."

They both laughed though neither was sincere and neither was fooled by the other. Malfoy proceeded on towards the infirmary, while Harry headed off in the direction of his dorm. As soon as he was out of the older man's sight, though, he stumbled and clutched the wall with one hand for support. The other went to his forehead, and he fought down the urge to hiss in pain. He had only used perceptual dilation a few times before, and this was the first time in which he'd done anything remotely as complicated as carrying on a conversation with someone obviously cleverer than himself while dilating as hard as possible. The resulting mental stress was roughly equivalent to an ice cream headache multiplied by a hundred.

Harry laughed, sincerely this time. "*And it was with Lucius Malfoy of all people!*" he thought to himself dizzily. "*I'm swimming with sharks!*" He shook his head to clear it. After a few seconds, the sudden migraine his dilation efforts had caused began to fade, and the boy made his way back to his dorm.

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"You will not find any Essence of Mandrake, Lucius. Not even with your great wealth."

Lucius was nearly at the infirmary door when he stopped suddenly and turned around at the sound of Professor Snape's voice. "Did the Headmaster send you to follow me,

Severus? Perhaps to be sure that I didn't injure any of his pets while en route?"

"I am here of my own volition, Lucius. I always check in with Madam Pomfrey before retiring for the evening to see if she requires any of her potions stocks refilled in the coming days."

"Ah, of course," Lucius said with mild sarcasm. "How conscientious of you. Almost Hufflepuffian. As for the Essence of Mandrake, you seem rather certain that I cannot obtain it. You forget, Severus, that I am accustomed to getting what I want out of life."

Snape snorted softly. "We both know you are accustomed to no such thing, Lucius."

Malfoy regarded the other Slytherin with a grim expression. "Touché," he finally said.

"As the Headmaster indicated, you will not obtain Mandrake because there is none to obtain. The harvesting time for fresh Mandrake will be in less than one month's time. Once harvested, adult Mandrakes cannot be preserved for more than a year. At this point in the growing season, any remaining preserved Mandrakes will have already been converted into raw potions ingredients, and *no one* distills entire Mandrakes down into pure Essence this late in the season, not in the quantities we need. It would be uneconomical, almost frivolous to do so. Fresh Mandrakes may be harvested beginning on the 29th of this month at precisely 4:47 a.m. local time when Jupiter enters Libra and not one second earlier. Until then, there is *literally* no place in the world from which to procure them."

Malfoy laughed bitterly. "Ah, Severus, how I've missed your pedantry." Then, his face sobered. "If you learn anything about who is responsible for what happened to my son, you will inform me immediately, yes? I think you owe me that much at least."

Lucius moved to stand directly in front of the other man, close enough for Snape to feel breath upon his face. It smelled faintly of crème de cassis.

"You will do this for me, Severus, because even though I had many opportunities, I never told the Dark Lord *that you were Dumbledore's spy*."

Severus said nothing in response. After a moment, Lucius turned back towards the infirmary door only to pause once again with his hand on the knob. "One last thing, Severus. *Harry Potter*. Is he ... truly Slytherin?" Lucius asked without turning around.

Snape tilted his head at the odd question. "Yes," he finally said. "Certainly more so than I was at his age. Perhaps even as much as you."

Lucius absorbed that silently before entering the infirmary without another word.

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Once inside, Lucius found Narcissa, as expected, in a chair next to Draco's bed with her needlepoint in hand. Snape spoke briefly with Madame Pomfrey before departing for the night. Then, the matron came over to the Malfoys to answer Lucius's many questions. Is Draco in any pain? No. Is he aware of what's happening around him? No. Will this condition cause any lasting side effects? No. Is it possibly bad for his vision that his eyes are affixed open and unable to blink? No. Through it all, Lucius Malfoy never took his

eyes off of his son and heir, while his wife never took her eyes off of her needlepoint. Finally, after Pomfrey had answered every question Lucius could think to ask, she returned to her office and left the Malfoys alone with their stricken child. There was silence in the room for a time before Lucius spoke again.

"Narcissa, my love?"

"Yes, dearest?"

"It goes without saying, my love, that if you had anything to do with our son's condition... I will slit your pretty little throat while you sleep."

She smiled without looking up from her needlework. "You are certainly welcome to try, dearest."

They did not speak again. After an hour-long silent vigil, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy rose, exited the infirmary, and made their way out of the school.

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**5 May 1993**

**Percy Weasley's study room in Gryffindor Tower**

**7:30 p.m.**

"But *why*?" asked Ron in utter confusion.

"Why what, Ronnikins?" George replied without looking up the parchments scraps laid out in front of him that he was trying to rearrange into a functional configuration. The Gryffindor prefects didn't have private rooms, but they *were* each entitled to a small private room with a table and chairs for private study. Ron and George had taken to studying with Percy in his private room ever since Fred's suspension, an event which surprisingly seemed to have

brought the three of them closer together. That said, at a time when both George and Percy were struggling with their final papers for Lockhart's DADA projects, Ron's somewhat persistent questioning strained their new closeness.

"Why can't they get the stuff they need to unstiffen the petrified students? I mean, I thought it was just the expense, but the Malfoys are loaded. And I hear that Finch-Fletchley's family is rich too. Surely they can afford the Mandrake stuff to unstiffen their sons."

"The problem, Ronald," said Percy, "is that there is simply not enough of the *Mandrake stuff* as you call it to be had for any price, and there won't be until the end of the month. It's bad enough that the school will have to sacrifice fifteen or so Mandrakes out of a harvest of only fifty plants just to undo the effects of the petrifications. I heard they were going to buy new school brooms for the first time in ten years with that money, but those plans have been postponed indefinitely even though the current school brooms are a serious safety hazard. And it's not *unstiffen*. It's *revive*."

With that, the prefect returned to his Polyjuice Potion thesis which would be due the following Monday. Despite his outwardly calm demeanor, Percy was in a state of quiet panic over his paper on account of how busy this weekend would be for him. Percy's roommate and best friend, Oliver Wood, had twisted his arm into filling in for Fred as Beater in Saturday's Quiddich match against Hufflepuff. At this point, the Lions were playing just for pride. They'd already been crushed by the Slytherins the previous November and then lost almost as badly to Ravenclaw in March when they were forced to play with only one Beater. Cormac McLaggen, who had been subbing for Fred, quit the team

after his brief petrification rather than be anywhere around Jim Potter, and no one else was interested in taking his place for the same reason. And while Percy wasn't as Quidditch-mad as his siblings, he was fairly handy on a broom which seemed to be a skill ingrained from birth among the entire Weasley family. Unfortunately, last minute practice plus a game on Saturday left Percy desperately short of time to finish his thesis. Secretly, he was rather hoping that some unexpected event would lead to the game getting canceled, a sentiment for which he would later feel profoundly guilty.

His curiosity satisfied for the moment, Ron looked across the small table towards George's project. There was a large sheet of parchment with thirty or so runic markings carefully arranged in an interlocking pattern. George had copied each of the individual runes onto smaller scraps of paper which he was now rearranging into new patterns. Curious, Ron reached out to turn the larger parchment around so he could see it better, but before he could even touched it, George slapped his hand away rather forcefully.

"No touchies, Ronnikins!" he said.

"Oww!" said the boy exclaimed. "What was that for?"

George pointed towards the parchment Ron had just been about to grab. "That there, brother-of-mine, is a genuine authentic *explosive rune*. Touch it wrong, and it's just possible you could set it off ... which would not be a pleasant experience for me, you, Percy, and whoever was charged with scrubbing our blood off the walls."

Ron's eyes widened while Percy just shook his head. "I still cannot *believe* Professor Lockhart gave you a sheet of explosive runes to play with," he said.

"I'm being careful, Percy," George replied irritably.

"That's not the point, George. I can't believe he'd give that to *any* student! How is it possible that something like explosive runes *isn't* dark magic?"

George shrugged. "They have perfectly proper purposes, Perfect Prefect Percy. Excavation. Construction work. I'll wager Bill uses these for his tomb-raiding."

"Curse-breaking, George, not ... *tomb-raiding*. You make the Heir Apparent of the House of Weasley sound like some sort of ... professional grave-robber."

"And you make him sound like he might claim our Wizengamot seat again someday," George replied with a grin. "We both know that's not likely to happen, now is it?"

Percy sniffed and resumed his writing. "It's the principle of the thing," he finally said quietly. "Anyway," he said changing the subject, "I still don't see what explosive runes, whatever their legality or utility, have to do with modifying Portkeys."

"Well, see, these particular runes in this particular arrangement work by taking the *idea* of wanton destruction and making it into an actual thing. Lockhart wants to know if its possible to tweak that idea so as to focus all that destructive potential on a different target. His theory is that you can take a bunch of runes that *should* result is a lovely ka-boom and instead rearrange them somehow so that all of the damage is inflicted on nearby magical wards while physical things in the way are left completely untouched."

"Is that possible?" Percy asked.

"Dunno," George replied while rearranging three of the scraps of paper onto which he'd copied individual runes into new positions. "I *think* it is, but so far I can't rightly see how."

Percy nodded. "You'll get it, assuming it's possible to get. Also, while we're on the subject, can I just say that the intense pride I have for you in finally working up to your potential is offset by my intense jealousy over the fact that you understand Ancient Runes better from being *self-taught* than I do from slogging through Professor Babbling's class for four years!"

George grinned. "Why Percy! That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me!"

Ron looked back and forth between his older brothers and their banter before shrugging and returning to his own homework.

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### ***Much later that night...***

The door to the Fourth Year Gryffindor boys' dorm room opened in complete silence ... and then closed seemingly by itself. In the room were only four beds, as Fred and George's starting class had been rather small. Three of the beds were occupied by sleeping boys snoring softly away in the night. Fred's empty bed was just a simple frame and mattress stripped bare of sheets. Out thin air, a hand appeared holding a wand. A soft whisper intoned the word *Somnium* three times, and each time a flash of light struck one of the three sleeping Gryffindors ensuring that none of them would wake before morning. Satisfied, the intruder threw off the Cloak of Invisibility and abandoned stealth for speed.



**"*SCRUTIMINIUS EXPLODING RUNES PARCHMENT.*"**

A tiny ball of light appeared at the end of Ron Weasley's wand accompanied by a soft hum that grew louder as he moved across the room towards the foot of George's bed. The boy's backpack rested on top of it. Swiftly, the intruder opened up the bag and *very carefully* removed the sheet of parchment bearing the explosive rune sequence that George had shown Ron earlier.

**"*GEMINO.*"** There was a soft flash, and suddenly the intruder was holding *two* sheets of identical parchment. He replaced the original back within George's bag and arranged it just as it had been before he arrived. Then, he pulled out a second parchment from one of his pockets and unfolded it to reveal a map of the school ... and everyone in it. After a few seconds, he confirmed that no one was up and about in the hallway or in the room he shared with Dean and Seamus, both of whom were sleeping as soundly as the Fourth Years were and for the same reason.

**"*Mischief managed,*"** the intruder whispered, and the map quickly faded away, leaving the parchment seemingly blank. He stowed the map, donned his stolen invisibility cloak once more, and left the room.

The map was, of course, *The Map*, the same one that had been stolen from the Weasley Twins back in November and which the intruder had found to be invaluable in his extracurricular activities ever since. Originally, those activities had been limited mostly to pranks and jokes, though always with a hidden purpose that Ron Weasley himself didn't even understand. Ron was not a naturally malicious child and certainly not a stupid one, even if he'd often *felt* stupid when comparing himself to his older brothers, each of whom was brilliant in his own way. But like so many children of his age and circumstances, he *was* terribly insecure, jealous, short-sighted and *oh so*

easy to manipulate. Best of all, his parents, brothers, and former best friend had all worked together to instill in him a wonderfully useful fear and paranoia regarding all things Slytherin. Heighten those emotions to an uncontrollable degree at just the right instant and accompany them with a suggested course of action disguised as "a brilliant idea," and Little Ronald was off like a wind-up toy soldier that marched resolutely in whatever direction he was pointed.

Framing those brilliant ideas as "pranks" only made it easier to manipulate the boy who had always been desperate for approval from George and Fred, no matter how much repressed anger towards them the boy also carried. A little Mandrake dust in Longbottom's gloves. That hilarious suggestion to the Twins for Jim's "King of the Leprechauns" crown. The dung bombs that Ron had provided for Jim which the Boy-Who-Lived had invisibly planted on unsuspecting Slytherins. He'd even arranged to play a prank on Jim and himself both, changing their hair to Slytherin colors so that he wouldn't be suspected as the instigator. And all of it mere preparation for the grandest pranks of all – stealing the Potter Cloak and the Marauders' Map while convincing Jim and the Twins that either Harry or someone else in Slytherin House was the actual thief. George's Portkey notes were an unexpected bonus, one that opened up other doors through which that cretin Warrington had been all too happy to walk.

True, Warrington's own prank on the Slytherin Quidditch Team – made at the instigation of his "secret friend" – had failed to kill Harry Potter in a way that might have implicated Jim, but it did lead directly into that marvelous duel between the Potter Twins and, even better, to Jim's public exposure as a Parselmouth. And *that*, combined with just the right touch of emotional influence, had finally driven a wedge between Little Ronald and the Brat-Who-

Lived. Naturally, that cunning serpent Harry Potter had concealed his own Parseltongue gifts from the crowd, but he'd still been quite helpful to Ron in turning the school against Jim. It amused the intruder that he was actually helping Harry to hide his Parselmouth status because doing so only made Jim seem darker as a result. Still, while the intruder had managed to compel the various Hogwarts serpents to ignore Harry's communication attempts, having a second Parselmouth rival was completely unacceptable, and so killing the elder Potter child was definitely on the long term agenda.

Unfortunately, Harry's demise would have to take a back seat for now, as the wedge between Ron and Jim had triggered other unexpected problems that needed addressing. The intruder had underestimated just how highly Ron prized his friendship with Jim Potter, and the break between them suddenly made it harder to influence Ron with any subtlety. Oh, he could inflame the boy with anger towards Jim when necessary, but it didn't linger for long before fading into regret and sadness over losing his best friend. "*Quite pathetic, really,*" the intruder thought contemptuously. Increasingly of late, he was forced to resort to direct control over the boy to get anything accomplished (most notably unleashing Slytherin's Monster on whichever unsuspecting fool had been the last to bother the Boy-Who-Lived whenever the Map showed that Jim was alone and had no alibi). But direct possession was an exhausting technique, one that the intruder could only use sparingly at first until their psychic link had grown stronger.

Still, the union had born better-than-expected benefits. He could now possess Ron almost at will, and soon the link would be strong enough for him to consume the child's soul completely and use that to fully embody himself. Then, the

real game would start. Right now, he only had one more move to make before the start of his endgame, but he expected that it would be a brilliant and devastating one. Indeed, one that might make checkmate inevitable. The Boy-Who-Wasn't-Ron-Weasley smiled at all the chess references he was now using. Truthfully, he was quite glad to have bonded with Ron Weasley instead of his sister despite the Gryffindor's occasional bouts of resistance. For one thing, he couldn't imagine *ever* keeping his presence a secret in a dorm full of *Slytherins*. But more importantly, he was delighted to discover that Ron Weasley's underappreciated genius meshed quite splendidly with his own. Many people had accused the intruder of being manipulative over the years, but before now, he would never have truly described himself as *a chess master*.

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**7 May 1993**

**9:55 p.m.**

After a grueling but successful two-hour long Occlumency session, Jim Potter was now on his way back to his dorm accompanied by the Headmaster.

"You don't need to escort me, sir," the boy said. "I can make it back to the Tower fine alone. And I'm sure you have a lot to do."

"I do indeed, my boy. And one of those things is getting used to patrolling these halls again, something I haven't had to do since I was Head Boy." Dumbledore smiled as if fondly remembering his own youth. "In light of recent developments, I have directed that the faculty spend time patrolling the halls until midnight along with the prefects. I would be both remiss and hypocritical if I didn't take a few patrols for myself."

Jim nodded at that. This late on a Friday night, the hallways were almost deserted. No one wanted to be caught out by the mysterious Heir, so most students now returned to their dorms immediately after the evening meal and only the most studious stayed in the Library past eight or nine o'clock. As Jim and his mentor walked down the halls chatting about everything from Occlumency exercises to the next day's Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match, several figures from the portraits they passed wished the Headmaster a good evening, although most of them did so with yawning voices, and a few were already asleep.

"Headmaster, can the portraits not keep an eye out for ... whatever it is? Do they actually need to sleep?"

"I'm afraid the portraits do indeed require rest after a fashion. The magic of the castle which sustains them also causes most of them to become quiescent at night. Only the portraits assigned to guard the dormitories can easily stay awake for long past midnight. But even during the periods when all the portraits are active, our mysterious Heir seems able to evade their scrutiny somehow. It is most vexing."

Jim nodded in agreement. Soon, they were at the entryway to Gryffindor Tower, where the two bid each other good night. From there, Dumbledore took a leisurely stroll around the castle, but after an hour had encountered no one else except for Filch who was, as usual, both despondent and embittered over the status of his cat, perhaps the only thing in the world the irascible man cared about. After that unpleasant conversation, Dumbledore was headed back to his office when he stopped suddenly and listened. Somewhere in the distance he could hear a sound, the faint echo of someone ... whistling?

He turned and headed in the direction from whence the sound came, and as he drew nearer, he recognized the tune as "*God Save the Queen*," of all things. Finally, after turning one last corner, he entered a dimly-lit and seldom-used side corridor. "*And it's also one with no portraits at all hanging on the walls*," he noted suspiciously. Halfway down and about thirty feet away, Dumbledore could see a small red-headed figure. It was Ronald Weasley, still whistling as he studied what looked like a large parchment map. On the wall behind the boy were words written in red paint, undoubtedly by a spell as there were no paint cans or other containers nearby. The twinkle faded from Dumbledore's eyes. "*This is wrong*," he thought, "*decidedly wrong*." Pulling out his wand from inside his robe, the Headmaster slowly moved towards the boy who finally put the parchment away and waited expectantly. Ronald had no wand out yet himself, but the boy still moved with easy confidence.

"Good evening, Headmaster," the boy said. "Thank you ever so much for coming to meet with me tonight."

As Dumbledore drew nearer, he could finally make out the words on the wall.

***EVEN YOUR MIGHTIEST LEGENDS ARE NOTHING  
BEFORE THE MIGHT OF THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN***

"I do hope, Mr. Weasley, that you have a good explanation for being out after curfew," Dumbledore said calmly. "To say nothing of your vandalism of this hallway."

Ron chuckled softly before looking up at the old wizard. They were about ten feet apart now, and Dumbledore was finally close enough to see the boy's eyes. He gasped – the boy's eyes were red, the same terrifying red eyes that had

haunted Dumbledore's memories for over a decade, along with the vicious smirk that was so familiar and yet so out of place on Ronald Weasley's normally genial face.

Dumbledore practically snarled as he trained his wand on the boy, every trace of "the kindly grandfather" now vanished from his demeanor as he finally realized who had been the author of the school's troubles for months now.

"*You!*" he exclaimed in righteous fury. "All this time, it was *YOU!*"

The boy laughed with a high-pitched giggle quite different than Ronald's normal laugh and far more menacing. His face assumed an amused and indulgent expression, as if he thought it funny that the doddering old man had finally solved the puzzle.

"Why yes, Albus – it was all me. *Me, me, me.*" He laughed again. And despite having a wand trained on him by one of the most powerful wizards in the world, he seemed supremely confident. Almost triumphant. "Me ... and *my special friend!*"

Dumbledore hesitated. "*What is that supposed to mean?*" he wondered. Then, he noticed a shadow at his feet, a shadow from something very large and yet unnaturally silent that had glided up right behind him. Moving at what should have been an impossible speed for a man of his age, Dumbledore whirled around to strike down this new enemy, but at the first glimpse of the brilliant green (and magic-resistant, he realized) scales, he realized it was already far too late. Instantly, he dilated his perceptions, but events were moving way too quickly to physically react in time, and so all he achieved was to give himself more time to contemplate his impending fate while leaving none at all to avert it.

*"How in Merlin's name did that sneak up behind me?!"* he thought in wonderment as his eyes reflexively panned up from the massive serpentine trunk to the gaping maw whose fangs bore one of the deadliest poisons known to wizarding-kind. And as that enormous head lowered to meet his gaze before he could had time to close his eyes, Albus Dumbledore's last conscious thought was: *"Oh. Silly question. Magic, of course."*

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: It goes without saying that Dumbledore is petrified but not dead. After all, he's one of the people who was in the meeting back in Chapter 1, so he's got plot immunity through the end of year 4. The idea that the Basilisk never killed anyone (except Myrtle) because people were looking at its reflections or through camera lens or some such thing was always improbable to me. Exactly how the Basilisk works in this universe will be explained soon, possibly next week.

AN 2: Snape's status as Draco's godfather was simply something I forgot until recently, so I decided to make the fact that Snape had been seemingly ignoring the boy for almost two years a plot point that will be expanded upon later.



# The Final Lesson of Gilderoy Lockhart

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 39: The Final Lesson of Gilderoy Lockhart

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***14 February 1993 (nearly three months ago)***

***The Great Hall on the morning of Valentine's Day***

*"There are worse ways to celebrate the holiday, I suppose, Gilderoy" said Flitwick with twinkling eyes. "I still recall the chaos you unleashed on the school on Valentine's Day in 1980."*

*"Chaos, Filius?" he said in confusion. "I'm sure you exaggerate."*

*"Exaggerate, my boy?" the diminutive professor said with a laugh. "You sent 800 Valentine's messages to yourself! We had to cancel lunch because of all the owl droppings befouling the Great Hall!"*

*Lockhart stared at his fellow Ravenclaw as if trying to figure out if he was joking. Then, he laughed. "Ha-ha! You know I'd quite forgotten about that bit of foolishness! I don't remember if I apologized at the time for however many points I cost Ravenclaw, but if not, I eagerly do so now."*

*"Oh, water under the bridge, my boy. Water under the bridge." Flitwick laughed. On the other side of him, however, Snape observed the conversation silently and with an odd expression.*

After breakfast, Snape made his way back to his private room. It was a Sunday and he had no classes nor anything else to distract him. Lacking any other way to procrastinate, he paced the room for almost ten minutes before he finally surrendered. As much as he hated the thought of what he was about to do, at the end of the day, Severus Snape cared about Hogwarts and its students. And that meant that some things were more important than both pride and practiced bitterness. Snape exhaled through gritted teeth. Then, he stepped over to the fireplace in his private quarters and tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fire.

"Potter Manor," he spat into the flames almost angrily. Seconds later, a house elf appeared in the flames and inquired as to the Potions Master's business. "Tell Lord Potter that Severus Snape wishes to speak with him about an urgent matter."

The elf nodded and scampered off. Several minutes later, James Potter, still in his pajamas and with unbrushed hair, stuck his head into the green flames. He looked decidedly happy at the sight of his old rival. "Snape, it's early. What do you want?"

"It's nine-thirty, Potter. People who actually work for a living have already been up for hours. In any event, this is not a social call. I wish to speak with you both in your capacity as an auror and as a parent to two Hogwarts students."

"Is Jim in trouble again?" he asked with concern. "Or Harry?"

"No more so than is usual for either of them. No, Potter, this is a matter of a more generalized concern." He hesitated. "I want to talk to you about Gilderoy Lockhart."

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## ***8 May 1993***

### ***Gryffindor Tower***

Ron jerked awake in his bed from yet another nightmare. He'd been having those with increasing regularity, and the worst part was that he could never remember anything that happened in them. Well, not quite - he could always remember a recurring theme of riding around as a prisoner in his own mind while some ... thing wore his body like a suit and walked around in it. He rarely remembered what the intruder did with his body, just a vague recollection of being trapped alone in the dark. But this one was different. He still didn't remember any specifics, but he had a strong impression that his dream had involved laughing at the body of Headmaster Dumbledore as he lay helpless on the floor. And then ... something about *chickens*. Ron reached for his wand and cast a quick Tempus. *6:45 a.m.* He sighed. It was a Saturday, and he'd planned to sleep in and catch up on his rest, and yet here he was once more - wide awake after some stupid nightmare.

The youngest Weasley boy yawned and got up out of bed to head to the bathroom and wash his face off. Once there, he reached for the faucet but then stopped and looked at his hand. There was something on palm, something brown and sticky. He pulled the hand up to his nose and sniffed. The smell was coppery and familiar, and for just a moment, a chill ran down his back as he wondered how on earth he could have woken up to find dried blood on his hands. Then, he shuddered for a few seconds in response to the disturbing mental image of something slithering through his mind and hungrily devouring the thoughts of concern and fear borne of his discovery. Shaking his head, the boy washed his hands and face thoroughly before heading back to bed. By the time he fell back asleep, the blood stains had already been forgotten.

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### ***Later in the Great Hall...***

Harry studied the faculty table with some interest. It was nearly the end of breakfast, and for some reason, Dumbledore had not put in an appearance. Of course, he didn't always show up for breakfast. Rank had its privileges, after all, and Dumbledore had an army of house elves at his command if he'd wanted to have breakfast in bed. But Marcus said that for as long as he'd been a Hogwarts student, the Headmaster had *always* come to breakfast on the morning of Quidditch matches to wish both competing teams good luck and to encourage fair play and good sportsmanship. Even when the *Slytherins* were playing!

"Maybe he's at the Ministry trying to get something done about these petrifications," said Daphne Greengrass.

"Or maybe Lord Malfoy's already gotten him sacked," Theo speculated.

"If there's anything to it, we'll find out soon enough," Harry said calmly while reviewing the *Daily Prophet's* Quidditch rankings. He was soon distracted by a loud laugh from farther down the table. It was Miranda Bonneville and a few others of her little clique, giggling over something (probably some insult the notoriously cruel Pureblood had made about some other girl).

"By the way," Daphne said quietly while leaning in close.

"The school year's almost over. Have you given any thought to *that* yet?"

Harry looked back at the girl. "Any thought to what?"

Daphne frowned. "The fact that Miranda Bonneville, whose agenda is roughly the total opposite of yours, will probably

become one of the Seventh Year prefects this summer and stands a good chance of becoming Head Girl. And she's as big a Pureblood bigot as Warrington is. Maybe even as bad as Draco was before you ... got hold of him."

"Honestly, I haven't thought about it. I've been kind of busy this year." Harry smiled. "And I can't *imagine* what you mean by suggesting I 'got hold' of Draco last year. Personally, I think he just matured a bit. That's all."

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Well, like I said, this year's nearly over, and *next* year, you may have to deal with having a Death Eater sympathizer whose a cousin to the Selwyns and who's able to dock points from you at will and otherwise make your life a hell."

"Ah!" Harry said softly but triumphantly. "She's a Selwyn! That's why you don't like her!"

Daphne sniffed. "I don't like her because she's more bitch than witch, and I don't want her vile family having influence over my own."

Harry nodded sagely. "Fair enough. I'll see what I can do."

Meanwhile, up at the faculty table, the staff were also wondering where the Headmaster was. Hagrid, in particular, seemed agitated.

"I do hope Perfessor Dumbledore gets 'ere soon. I wanted ta talk ta him 'bout my roosters!"

"What about them, Hagrid?" asked the long-suffering Professor Kettleburn.

"Well... sumun kilt 'em all!" the half-giant exclaimed.

"Someone, Hagrid? Are you quite sure it wasn't a fox or something?"

"Foxes eat chickens and roosters, Professor Kettleburn. They don't slice their heads off but leave 'r bodies round to rot!"

Kettleburn started to respond when he was interrupted by the DADA instructor who was nearby listening in.

"I say, Silvanus, old chap. Refresh my memory. Aren't there some dark creatures that are vulnerable to the sound of cock crows?"

Surprised, Kettleburn stopped to think. "Only one that I can think of off-hand, though it's incredibly rare."

"Oh?" said Lockhart while bearing a curious expression.  
"Which one?"

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### ***After breakfast in Gryffindor Tower...***

The members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team were gathered in their Common Room so that Oliver could give a quick speech in front of whole house when Emily entered, still wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Hold on, Oliver," she said. "No one's leaving the Tower. The match today has been ... indefinitely postponed."

"WHAT?!" he exploded. "What in Merlin's name for?!"

Before she could answer, a message in the voice of Professor McGonagall sounded in the room and all throughout the castle.

**"All students report to their dormitory Common Rooms immediately! Until further notice, the school is locked down, and any students found out of bounds without a note from a teacher will ... suffer the most serious consequences. That is all."**

Jim stepped forward. "Emily?" he asked with a concerned voice. "What's happened?"

She looked at him strangely and then took a deep breath before addressing the whole room. "Gryffindors, listen up! About twenty minutes ago... Headmaster Dumbledore was ... was found petrified. Professor McGonagall is running things for the time being, and she has ordered that no one is to be out of their common rooms other than prefects until further notice. We're in lockdown until Monday, and after that, prefects will escort the rest of the students to their various classes for the remainder of term." She drew another shaky breath. "Assuming there *is* a remainder of the term, that is. The Board of Governors will meet tomorrow afternoon in emergency session to discuss... whether to close the school."

There was an immediate outburst, bordering on riot, at that announcement, and naturally, those Gryffindors inclined to think that Jim Potter was the Heir were not shy about saying so. Finally, Neville had had enough. He raised his wand and shot off a round of fireworks.

"Hey! Idiots! I was sharing a room with Jim last night! He was in bed by 10:30 and I stayed up until midnight working on my DADA paper. He never left the room!" Longbottom's remark chastened a few people but some, like McLaggan and some of the older males were not impressed.

"How do we know you're not in on it *with him*, Longbottom?!" Cormac snarled at the boy.

"ENOUGH!" shouted Emily. "The Headmaster was seen by Caretaker Filch shortly before midnight. *I* stayed in the Common Room until after *three* studying, and I never saw anyone leave either. Does anyone want to accuse *me* of working with the Heir?"

At that, the crowd quieted down a good deal, as Emily Rossum was known to be on the Auror track and was tops in her class in Defense.

"I thought not," she said in a calmer voice. "Now, everyone back to their rooms. At quarter of noon, we will all meet down here and walk to the Great Hall together for lunch. *Roll will be taken! No one will be allowed out of their dorms alone!*"

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### ***Meanwhile in the Prince's Lair ...***

Harry and Theo sat alone on opposite sides of the big table. Both were noticeably upset about Marcus's announcement to the House – that the school was in lockdown and might soon be closed. And astoundingly, it was because Albus Dumbledore, the Invincible Defeater of Grindlewald, had been brought down by a glorified schoolboy prank.

"I should have been on this since Halloween," Harry said in a hollow bitter voice. "Ever since that damned cat got petrified. I should have been on this, but instead I let myself get distracted with Patronuses and ping-pong and Potter family drama! And now we're going to lose everything we've worked for over the last two years!" He turned to the vacant and silent Hydra Throne and hissed angrily at it. There was no response. "Hmph! And I'll probably *never* find



out who the Heir of Slytherin is and how he turned the Hogwarts snakes against me!"

"Yeah, sorry, not really seeing how this is your fault or your responsibility," said Theo reasonably. "Do you really think you had an obligation to beat someone who was able to defeat Dumbledore? You're a Second Year, and yet you want to assume greater responsibility than what the prefects carry, never mind what the professors carry."

"Yes, Theo, yes I do," he replied angrily. "Because I've got more to lose than any of them. If the school gets shut down, it will stay shut down for a minimum of two years. I'll have to start over again somewhere else. Probably Durmstrang if Peter Pettigrew has his way!"

"You'll adapt and excel. You always do. So what are you really worried about?" Harry looked towards Theo with an annoyed expression, but his friend was undeterred. "Is it really yourself? Or are you more worried about your friends?"

Harry sighed loudly. "Of course I'm worried about my friends. I have no idea what sort of fallback Wizarding Britain has in the event of Hogwarts' closure, but given the general competence level of our national leaders, I can't imagine it's anything good. Plus ..." He paused suddenly and looked away.

"Plus what?" Theo said calmly. "It's okay, Harry. I've been thinking about it too. If Hogwarts' closes and Draco stays petrified, it's unlikely that Lucius Malfoy will take me in again for the summer. Which means I'm probably going back to Nott Hall and my violently abusive father."

"How are you so *calm* about this?"

Theo shrugged. "Occlumency lessons since the age of nine? Besides, I've lived in fear for my life from Tiberius since I was in short pants. Whatever else happens, I've decided that I'll never live in fear of him again. If worst comes to worst, I'll stun the bastard and then climb over the walls and run away. I still have an offer of sanctuary from Madam Longbottom."

Harry grimaced. He would find *some* way to keep the school from being closed down, whatever it took. And if he could not accomplish that, then he would find some way to protect Theo from the other boy's psychotic father ... again, *whatever it took*. Grimly, he thought once more about his desire not to start a body count and wondered if, perversely, that was a form of moral cowardice. He rubbed his eyes in frustration.

"Come on, Theo. Let's go. It'll be time for lunch soon." The two rose and headed for the door. Just as they reached the threshold, Harry spun around and hissed at the Hydra in a fury. There was no response, and Harry sighed loudly in disappointment. Theo gave his friend a sad look.

"Sorry, Harry."

"It's okay, Theo. Someday, I'll figure this out."

"Yeah," Theo said as he walked out the door ahead of Harry. "It's a pity you can't just conjure a snake and get it to translate for you."

"Mm-hmm," Harry replied absently as he followed his friend out, and the door closed behind him.

Exactly four seconds later, the door opened again, and Harry practically flew into the room, his wand out and an incantation on his lips.

"**SERPENSORTIA!**" he bellowed. There was a flash of light, and suddenly, a medium-sized milk snake appeared on the table.

"Talk to the Hydra statue!" Harry hissed commandingly. "Ask it why it won't talk to me!"

"Um, oookay," the snake hissed dubiously before turning towards seemingly immobile statue. "Hello, snakes! The Speaker wishes to know why you won't talk to him."

"Seriously?" exclaimed Theo in disbelief. "You honestly never thought of trying this?"

"*Not. Now. Theo.*" Harry ground out the words through clenched teeth as he looked back and forth between the statue and the snake he'd conjured. The Hydra sat still and inanimate. Then, just as Harry was about to give up once more and vanish the snake, one of the Hydra heads moved. It was Delilah the Boomslang who turned her head to face Rajah, the great Basilisk who stood in the middle and served as the unofficial chair-snake for their committee.

"The false-snake raises a valid point," she hissed. "We are not expressly forbidden to talk to snakes. Only to other Speakers."

"Be silent, vacuous one!" the three-headed Runespoor angrily hissed in three-part harmony. "The order was clear and came from one with authority. It is not for us to question his command!"

"Well I, for one, do question it," hissed Ka the Cobra somewhat pompously. "It is far from clear that the Prince-Emeritus has the authority to issue such a command in his current state. The Creator left no wisdom applicable to these ... unusual circumstances."

"Irrelevant," rumbled Nidhogg the Krait. "This is a test for the Prince-Claimant. If he cannot defeat his enemy without our assistance, then he does not deserve that assistance in the first place."

"Perhaps," hissed Jormungand reasonably, "but we can at least respect the Prince-Claimant's cleverness in finding away around the limitations imposed by his secret enemy."

"What?!" Mara the Ashwinder hissed almost incredulously. "The Prince-Claimant wasn't clever *at all*! He only thought of this stratagem because the non-Speaker youngling suggested it to him! He's had *months* to think of conjuring a serpent intermediary!" Harry actually winced at that and then blushed slightly.

"Enough!" hissed Rajah with authority. "I call for a vote. Let each serpent speak their will. Shall we speak to Prince-Claimant Harry Potter in defiance of the Prince-Emeritus's orders? Or shall we remain silent? Yes or no?"

"No!" hissed the Runespoor in unison.

"No," hissed the Krait.

"Yes," hissed the Boomslang forcefully.

"No," hissed the Ashwinder after a brief hesitation.

"Yes," hissed the Python.

"Yes," hissed the Cobra.

"The tie-breaking vote is mine," said the Basilisk. "And I vote ... no. The Prince-Claimant has failed to demonstrate a vision as bold and all-encompassing as that of the Prince-

Emeritus, even if that vision is a profoundly troubling one. Thus, I vote to return to our former silence."

"But Ka...!" interrupted Delilah.

"We have *voted*, Exemplar of Subtlety. The majority has spoken and you will submit to it."

The Boomslang hissed in frustration. "Very well, Exemplar of Ambition. I submit to the majority's will. I will say nothing more to Prince-Claimant Potter."

The rest of the snakes hissed softly in agreement and moved back into their normal resting positions.

"Not even of the fact that the order came directly from Prince-Emeritus Tom Marvolo Riddle," she hissed smugly.

Instantly, all of the other heads hissed angrily at her defiance in revealing that secret, but Harry was sure he could hear the soft "ki-ki-ki" of Delilah's laugh over the din. Finally, the angry hisses died down, and the snakes returned to quiescence. The milk snake studied the throne for a moment and then turned back to Harry.

"They said no," it hissed blandly, as if bored by the proceedings.

"So I heard, but thanks anyway," hissed Harry as he raised his wand and vanished the conjured snake.

"Well," Theo asked. "For the benefit of those of us who don't speak snake, what did they say?"

Harry's face darkened. "They said '*Harry Potter is an idiot!*'" he said as he slammed his hand onto the table. "I should have realized months ago!"

"Realized what?"

Harry turned to face his friend with an angry expression. "The person who silenced all the snakes is ... probably the only person who ever could have! I'd assumed that the Heir of Slytherin was someone *descended* from Tom Marvolo Riddle, another student. But the person who *ordered* the snakes not to talk to me was both another Parseltongue *and* a former Prince. It's not Riddle's descendant. It's *Riddle himself!*"

"What?! You mean this Riddle guy's here at Hogwarts?"

"Yeah," said Harry. The boy reigned in his emotions and focused his anger into cold determination. "And I should have guessed the truth from the start. Who's the only new faculty member whose arrival coincided with the petrifications? Who's the only new faculty member who *also* is remotely powerful enough and cunning enough to possibly get the drop on Dumbledore?" Harry's eyes narrowed as his surged against his emotional barriers. "And who's the guy who I distrusted from pretty much the moment I first saw him?"

Theo's eyes widened. "Lockhart?!"

"The man himself. Someone who's a bumbling pompous fool one minute and a brilliant duelist and expert on forbidden magic the next! Tom Riddle is *here in this school* disguised as Gilderoy Lockhart!" Despite himself, Harry fumed at the idea while Theo contemplated his shocking theory. Then, Harry stiffened as an idea came to him. He turned to face his young friend.

"Theo, I need to borrow your family ring," he said, causing the boy's eyes to widen in surprise.

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***DMLE Headquarters***  
***10:00 a.m.***

Unusually for someone of his stature, James Potter was at his desk early on a Saturday morning going through reports forwarded to him from magical law enforcement agencies around the world. He'd begun making inquiries almost three months before at the suggestion of Severus Snape. That by itself was an astonishing development. The two men had practically been in a blood feud since they were both eleven years old, but Snape was right – if the children of Hogwarts were in danger, it was time for the two of them to put aside their differences, at least for a while. Over the last few weeks, reports had finally been coming in, and while several of them were suggestive, none so far really constituted proof. None, that is, until late the previous afternoon, when a contact with the Australian DMLE forwarded the file on a cold case from the mid-1980's. James had come in on a Saturday to review it and take some notes before heading over to Hogwarts for the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match. He planned to quietly advise Dumbledore of his findings and then deliver a formal report to Scrimgeour on Monday.

Suddenly, one of the junior aurors burst into his office. "Sir!" she said almost in a panic.

"Easy, Talbot. Calm down. Now what's the trouble?" The young woman swallowed, and James was surprised by her lack of decorum. "*Obviously something bad*," he thought. And he was right.

"We just got a Floo call from Hogwarts, sir. From Professor McGonagall." The young auror shook her head as if she couldn't believe what she was reporting. "Sir! Albus Dumbledore has been ... petrified!"

James gaped at the young woman in amazement and then looked down at his file. "No," he thought. "*I guess I won't be waiting to report to Scrimgeour on Monday.*"

"Tell Professor McGonagall that I'll be over by Floo momentarily. Then, put a squad on standby. At least four aurors, including one senior. After I've met with her, I'll come back to collect them, but I want to be ready to move as soon as possible."

Talbot stared at him in astonishment. "But ... but sir. I thought the Hogwarts defenses wouldn't let us enter the grounds in force."

His eyes sparked almost triumphantly. "That's not *quite* true, Talbot. There's an exception to that rule that now suddenly applies. Now, carry out my orders." The junior auror nodded and left the office. James opened a file cabinet and began thumbing through various form documents until he found the one he needed.

### ***Form 20315/HAF - Hogwarts Authorization to Pursue Homicide Investigation***

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#### ***That afternoon at lunchtime...***

Harry's surprising request led to a fifteen minute argument between Theo and himself. The Slytherins were forbidden to leave the dungeon unaccompanied, and so Harry had wanted to borrow Theo's heirloom Notice-Me-Not ring so that he could slip away from the rest of the House after lunch and search Lockhart's room. Naturally, Theo thought that was completely insane. Harry responded by repeating what Flint had told the House earlier – that after lunch, all of the professors would be holding an impromptu faculty meeting probably for the rest of the afternoon to discuss



their options and hopefully present a unified front before the Board of Governors' meeting to be held on Sunday. That included Lockhart who with luck would be away from the DADA classroom and his attached quarters for hours.

Theo thought Harry's plan was absurdly "Gryffindorish." Harry bluntly admitted that it was. Unfortunately, they probably had a day at most to prove that Lockhart was the Heir of Slytherin before all the students were evacuated and the school shut down, so for once there simply wasn't time for Slytherin scheming. Theo finally agreed but with a condition: He insisted on accompanying Harry on his fact-finding mission. As Harry had pointed out, Theo would likely be the person most physically endangered by the school's closing, and as bad as it would be for Tiberius Nott to discover that Theo had the enchanted ring, it would be even worse if the Death Eater learned that his son had loaned it to the Potter Heir who later got caught with it.

Lunch passed slowly and quietly. The whole student body seemed subdued by the prospect of the school's closing, and Harry noticed Jim sitting off away from the rest of his House, many of whom were giving him sullen looks. Some did so because they thought Jim was the Heir, but it seemed others were just as down on him because the Boy-Who-Lived hadn't defeated the villain already. While Harry's relationship with his twin was complicated and fraught, he certainly didn't envy Jim his status as Boy-Who-Lived.

*"How miserable it would be if pretty much the entire nation thought I was some sort of twelve-year-old superhero who should be expected to succeed where Dumbledore himself failed!"* Harry thought glumly.

Harry *also* noticed that Lockhart arrived late for lunch, and the man seemed simultaneously excited and worried after

his arrival. While eating, Harry and Theo quietly sounded out Blaise, Daphne, Ginny, and Astoria, and without giving out any details, they persuaded the four to run interference for them. At the end of the lunch hour, McGonagall announced that all students were to report to their dormitories while all teachers would be attending a mandatory faculty meeting in the staff lounge. As the Slytherins were leaving, Harry and Theo drifted to the back of the pack. Theo nodded, and Harry reached out and put his hand on the other boy's shoulder. Both of them took deep breaths as Theo twisted the ring. Still holding their breaths, the two darted away from the other Slytherins in the direction of the DADA classroom and Lockhart's attached quarters. The magical ring worked - no one noticed them.

About a thirty seconds later, they stopped when Harry's breath gave out. Theo looked at him with a mixture of surprise and annoyance.

"You should take up jogging," he said. "I may have hated every second of Lockhart's early morning workouts, but I can hold my breath for almost two minutes now."

"I'll take that under advisement," Harry replied while gulping in air. Then, he took a good hard look at his friend. Both of them were recovering from a certain degree of parental neglect that was being corrected magically via nutrient potions, but while Harry looked healthier than he'd ever been before, he was still nowhere near as muscular as his twin brother. And now that Theo had mentioned it, Harry pulled up a memory of first seeing Theo at last September's Sorting Feast. Comparing the two, he realized for the first time that his friend had indeed become much healthier-looking since then. He'd also grown an inch or

two this year and had become noticeably athletic due to Lockhart's training regimen.

*"Hmm. I guess I have been ignoring physical development in favor of purely mental development this year. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to do some running this summer ... though I'll be damned if I do it at dawn!"*

The two continued on to the DADA classroom.

"I still can't believe we're doing this," Theo muttered. "This is the most Gryffindorish thing I've ever done!"

"Really?" Harry asked in genuine surprise. "Worse than insisting that we lower you first into a pit of Devil's Snare? Or you and Blaise sneaking into the Mirror Room while I was distracting Quirrell and Voldemort with nothing but snappy banter?"

"Fair enough," Theo replied. "Say, do you think this is something we'll have to do at the end of every school year? Because if it is, maybe we *should* let them close the school and relocate us to Durmstrang. It can't be *that* much more dangerous than the nonsense we seem to get into."

Harry chuckled as they arrived at the door to Lockhart's classroom. It was locked. Harry quickly went through the handful of upper-level unlocking spells he knew and hit pay dirt with one Missy Bulstrode had taught him that was borderline illegal, which was thankfully not a problem in this instance because its applicability meant that the locking spell itself was also an illegal one. Harry and Theo quietly crept into the empty classroom.

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***Meanwhile in the Staff Room...***

The Staff Room was on the Third Floor and was a relatively spacious area. Used primarily as a lounge, the Staff Room was also where faculty meetings were held, as Dumbledore preferred his meetings to be informal and so declined to hold them in his office. There was a fireplace attached to the Floo Network for the benefit of those teachers who did not have personal Floo connections, an amenity limited to Dumbledore and the four Heads of House. There were also enough comfy chairs for every faculty member plus a few extra for guests. There were also two attached faculty lavatories, one marked "Wizards" and the other "Witches."

Presently, the Staff Room was home to the entire Hogwarts faculty, most of whom were shouting at one another. A clear majority, led by Lily Potter, wanted to close the school immediately before any more petrifications occurred and without waiting on a decision from the Board of Governors. A vocal minority opposed that plan however, including Flitwick, Professor Babbling, and surprisingly Professors Trelawney and Lockhart. The Divination Professor warned direly that it was an inauspicious time to close down the school and doing so would impose terrible consequences. McGonagall, who believed that the students' safety trumped all other concerns, was actually reassured by Trelawney's opposition. If Sybil Trelawney and her All-Knowing Inner Eye strongly opposed some course of action, McGonagall generally thought it was a good idea to go ahead and do it as soon as possible. Flitwick, however, was opposed for more pragmatic reasons and grimly reminded the other faculty members that if the school closed, that closure would be magically enforced for a minimum of two years. Furthermore, if parents became comfortable with alternative options for their children's education *and* the mystery of what caused the petrifications remained unsolved, there was no reason to think that any of those students would return once the school reopened.

"I quite agree with Filius. If we close the school, then whoever is responsible for the petrifications will almost certainly escape without anyone ever figuring out who it was. If that's the case, how could we ever reopen in a manner that reassures the parents?"

"It's interesting that you would place capturing the Heir of Slytherin above the safety of our students, Gilderoy," said Snape. "An odd perspective for a *Defense* instructor."

"Severus!" McGonagall said in a warning voice. Then, despite herself, she glanced up nervously at the clock on the wall. Lockhart noticed, and his eyes narrowed slightly before he turned back to Snape.

"Honestly, Severus. I'm not even sure what you mean about the '*safety of our students.*' While certainly troubling, petrification is not a life-threatening experience, and when the Mandrakes are ready on the 29th, everyone can be restored." Beside him, Professor Sprout nodded in agreement. "So all we need to do is stay calm. And in the meantime, I have ... some ... very promising ... leads." The man trailed off slowly as his eyes widened. Then, he suddenly jumped up from his chair.

"Aah! Er, excuse me, one and all, but I've just realized. There's something in the DADA classroom that might well shed some light on these affairs! Do excuse me for a moment." Then, he darted towards the door.

"Gilderoy!" exclaimed Minerva excitedly. "We are in the middle of an important meeting!"

"It's alright, Minerva, I shan't be a jiffy. Just talk amongst yourselves until I return. Here's a topic! '*Sweetbreads: Neither Sweet Nor Bread.*' Discuss!" And with that, he fled

the room. As the door closed, Snape also shot out of his chair.

"Should I go after him, Minerva?" he asked urgently.

"I don't *know*, Severus! Oh, if only he'd waited another minute or two!"

"Severus, why in Merlin's name would you *pursue* Gilderoy to his office?" asked Lily in confusion. "Minerva, what's going on?"

Before she could answer, the fireplace burst into green flames, and immediately James Potter came through followed by three other aurors. "Nobody move!" Potter yelled. "Gilderoy Lockhart, you are under..." Potter stopped and scanned the room. "Arrest," he said in disappointment.

"James?!" Lily exclaimed, but Snape interrupted her before she could say anything more.

"He just left seconds ago, Potter," he said quickly. "On his way to his classroom or so he said."

"Right. Aurors with me. Everyone else, *stay here!*" The aurors left the Staff Room in pursuit while Lily and the other faculty members bombarded McGonagall and Snape with questions.

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It had taken Harry and Theo nearly five minutes to open all the drawers to Lockhart's desk. Each one had been spell-locked with a *different* spell, which Harry thought was absurdly paranoid, even for a dark wizard and especially because there was nothing of interest in them. Just a grade book, attendance records, lesson plans, and several stacks

of final papers that had already been turned in. And certainly *nothing* about Tom Riddle *or* the Heir of Slytherin.

Other than Lockhart's desk and chair, the room was fairly empty. All the student chairs and desks had been pushed to the sides in preparation for the Team Protector session which had been scheduled for Sunday afternoon but canceled after Dumbledore's petrification. The only other item of furniture in the room was the covered brass birdcage still full of Cornish Pixies that was situated next to the wall behind Lockhart's desk.

"Well, nothing out here," said Harry. "I guess we need to move on to his private quarters."

"Oh must you, Mr. Potter?" said a voice from the door. It was Lockhart, who was pointing his wand at the two of them. "Surely you've already invaded my privacy enough for one day. I'm almost inclined to award you House points for actually knowing the Charms to bypass my locking spells. But then, I'd have to dock you points as well for not anticipating that I'd added a personal alarm spell to my defense scheme since *the last time* someone broke into this room."

Lockhart sauntered around the side of the room, and Harry and Theo edged around the opposite direction in an effort to keep the desk between Lockhart and themselves.

"Was that you then also, Mr. Potter? Professor Snape seemed quite convinced that it was your brother who stole all those vials of Polyjuice Potion. He was very disappointed when I proved otherwise. What *will* he think when I bring *you* in as the culprit?"

Harry took a breath and decided to bluff his way out. "I imagine any anger towards me will be offset when I tell him

that *you're* the Heir of Slytherin."

Lockhart paused and grinned. By this time they were still on opposite sides of the desk but now with the long side between them. "Me, Potter? You think *I* am the Heir of Slytherin?! What in Merlin's name leads you to that conclusion?"

"Well, for one thing, based on this school's history over the last few decades, '*the DADA instructor did it*' is a reasonable starting point for any investigation. For another, I have reason to believe that Tom Marvolo Riddle is present in this school in some capacity, and the way I see it, you're pretty much the only one who could realistically be him in disguise."

Lockhart froze in surprise and then looked even more amused. "Ah, so not only am I the Heir of Slytherin, I'm also the elusive Tom Riddle come to Hogwarts for some nefarious purpose. That's actually a very amusing theory, albeit for reasons I'm afraid I cannot currently share with you."

At that, all three of them were distracted by the sounds of boots running down the hall nearby, and Harry took the opportunity to push both Theo and himself back against the wall while drawing his own wand. Then, to his complete surprise, his father burst into the room, wand drawn and with four aurors behind him. James Potter looked surprised to see him, but immediately focused his attention on Lockhart instead.

"Abbott, put a shield on the boys." One of the aurors directed a wand towards Harry and Theo and cast a Protego Shield over them. "It's okay, Harry. It's just for your



protection. Gilderoy Lockhart, you're under arrest. Surrender your wand and come peacefully."

"Before I surrender *anything*, Potter, I would like to know what I am being charged with. For that matter, how are you lot even here to charge me? It was my understanding that aurors weren't permitted on the Hogwarts grounds for such purposes."

"Unfortunately for you, Lockhart, there's an exception for *murder investigations*."

"Oh yes, I do recall you mentioning that the last time you were here. And who is it I'm meant to have murdered?"

James's eyes narrowed angrily. "*Whoever it was*," thought Harry in surprise, "*James Potter takes it personally*."

"Does the name *Lazarus White* mean anything to you, Professor?" James said in a cold voice.

Lockhart's eyebrows rose slightly before he regained control of himself. "Should it?"

"Oh, I think so," James said harshly. "I've been studying you and your published works for a while now, though to be fair, it was Professor Snape who put me onto you. At first, all I could find was an odd and troubling coincidence. You see, over the course of your first four books, you described defeating or destroying a number of different dark creatures. *It just so happens* that for every such incident, there was always a report of someone in the region – an auror, a defense instructor, sometimes just some local witch or wizard with a history of heroism and civic responsibility – but always someone who *had* been working to defeat those creatures only to show up later suffering from retrograde amnesia. And always around the same time as your own

'*heroic feats.*' In fact, for three of those victims, it was total retrograde amnesia, a complete and irreversible erasure of the person's former personality and past."

"That *is* an odd coincidence, Auror Potter, but I'm still not hearing anything about a murder."

The other aurors were fanning out to flank Lockhart while Potter kept him talking. Abbott moved closer to Theo and Harry while still maintaining a Protego over them, ready to usher them out of the room the instant things went hot.

"Well you see, Lockhart, that takes us to your fifth book, ***Wanderings with Werewolves*** in which you supposedly killed the werewolf who responsible for the Wagga Wagga Massacre of 1985. Lazarus White was a highly respected and skilled young auror with the Australian DMLE whose entire family was slaughtered in that attack. He survived ... until you showed up looking to interview him about his experiences. Next thing you know, he's vanished never to be seen again, and *you're* writing a heavily edited book about how *you* killed the Wagga Wagga werewolf all by yourself. What happened, Lockhart? Was a trained battle-hardened auror too much for you? So you had to *kill* him instead of just stealing his memories of slaying the werewolves? And I guess after that, you learned to cover your tracks better?"

To James's mounting rage, Lockhart actually laughed. "Oh, Potter, so full of righteous indignation over half-formed theories. Such a Gryffindor you are! Do you actually have any *evidence* to support these *slanderausaccusations*?"

"I have enough for Veritaserum, Lockhart. Now, will you come along peacefully? Or will you make things difficult? Because I strongly suspect you murdered a brother auror

and you mind-assaulted Merlin knows how many other heroes. So honestly? I kind of hope you resist."

Lockhart threw his head back and gave out another "*ha-Ha!*" Then, in a blur of motion, he lashed out, casually flicking his wand towards Abbot and banishing him into his own Protego spell. The shield collapsed immediately, and the stunned auror fell to the ground between Theo and Harry, knocking them both aside. The attack in his son's direction distracted James for just a second as he looked over to Harry in concern. The remaining aurors sent stunners towards Lockhart but were shocked when he casually batted them aside. On the floor over by the wall, Harry quietly cast the Avertio Shield spell on his own wand.

Then, Lockhart waved his wand towards his heavy desk, which suddenly flew through the air towards James Potter. By that point, James had recovered from his momentary surprise and instantly transfigured the desk into a flock of butterflies which flew up harmlessly towards the ceiling. But then, he realized that the desk attack was only a feint, as Lockhart had ducked under another auror's attack spell, dropped to one knee, and waved his wand in a wide arc.

**"ACCIO FURNITURE!"** Instantly, all the desks and chairs that had been pushed up against the back wall slid quickly and violently towards Lockhart knocking most of the aurors to the ground. James reacted faster than the rest though and threw himself over the sliding furniture to land in a crouching position. To his surprise though, Lockhart had already moved on to casting his next spell, and to his horror, James knew what that spell was.

"LOCKHART! NO!" he cried out and tried desperately to get a stunner off but the furniture blocked him. As Potter was desperately trying to get off a clean shot, Lockhart whirled

his wand arm in a wide circle over his head. From where Harry sat, it looked as though Lockhart's eyes were lit up with delirious madness.

"***FIENDFYRE!***" he cried out in exultation before slashing his wand down almost to the floor.

And then, Hell came to Hogwarts.

Harry had a brief impression of a portal opening up to ... somewhere else. Then, an unnatural fire *poured* out of that opening, one that looked like lava only no longer bound by gravity, and along with the hellfire came incoherent screams that filled Harry with dread. Screams of fury and terror and above all jubilation over the opportunity to *feed and burn*. Lockhart gestured wildly with his arms, splaying them out in opposite directions, and in response, the hellish fire shot out both to the left and the right of the man until they formed a wall of flame separating Lockhart from his attackers.

On the right side of the room, Harry saw the hellfire heading in his general direction, although it appeared that it would not strike him nor Theo nor the stunned auror. He blinked twice and dilated his perceptions before spending two beats of his heart considering his options. Then, he cast a quick Levitation Charm and used it to propel Theo and Abbot even farther from the hellfire even as he flung himself in the opposite direction just as the flames reached the wall.

"HARRY!" Theo screamed as the young Slytherin was now alone with Lockhart on one side of the infernal flames while Theo and the aurors were stuck on the other side. James was horrified by the development and furiously cast a

bludgeoning curse towards Lockhart only to see it consumed by the laughing flames.

For his part, Harry ignored everything except Professor Lockhart and pointed his wand in the other man's direction. "**LACERO.**" Harry practically whispered the curse hoping that Lockhart wouldn't hear and realize what spell he was using, and he aimed close to the ground, hoping it was too low for Lockhart to parry with his own Averno. Harry's gambit succeeded as the Cutting Curse shot towards the man and sliced the back of his hamstring before he could dodge. Lockhart screamed and dropped to one knee. But before Harry could press his advantage, Lockhart lashed out with his wand again, this time targeting the Cornish Pixie cage which flew across the room to crash land right in front of Harry.

The boy had just a moment of panic as the entire swarm broke free and went after him in a frenzy, but then he collected himself and cast the Vestimentarum shield as he'd learned all those months ago. Immediately, all the attacking pixies shied away after a few hits on his electrified personal body armor. He climbed to his feet and made his way easily through the cloud of pixies. Lockhart was still limping from the Cutting Curse and had just made his way up the small staircase to the door of his private quarters. Harry fired off two more Cutting Curses, but Lockhart parried both before escaping into the other room. Harry muttered a mild profanity and then turned to look at the wall of Fiendfyre which now reached up to the ceiling and completely blocked off the other half of the room. He thought he could hear James and Theo calling for him, but their voices were distorted eerily by the flames, and Harry was disturbed to see angry bestial faces appearing within the fire and then receding back into it.

The boy knew little of Fiendfyre. It was considered very dark and almost always led to a stretch in Azkaban unless used for some legitimate purpose (which was narrowly defined). Unless suppressed magically, it would burn for days, and if allowed to run free it would actively pursue living targets out of a quasi-sentient desire to burn them to death. Then, Harry paled. "*Lockhart's left the room and is likely trying to flee Hogwarts,*" he thought with a sudden stab of fear. "*Which means that he might surrender control of the Fiendfyre at any moment!*" Concluding that Lockhart probably couldn't do anything to him that was *worse* than burning to death, Harry darted up the steps after the fleeing man.

Immediately upon crossing the threshold, Harry had to duck out of the way of a Disarming Charm. The boy and his former teacher then engaged in a duel that onlookers would have considered quite impressive if rather brief and with a predictable outcome. After ten seconds of furious spellcasting and parrying, Harry dodged a Jelly-Legs Jinx only to step onto a small Persian rug. Lockhart lashed out with a silent Summoning Charm that targeted the rug and caused it to fly out from underneath's Harry's feet and dump him flat onto his back.

"***EXPELLIARMUS. INCARCEROUS.***" Two quick spells later, and Harry was disarmed and bound on the floor with Lockhart holding the boy's wand. He examined it briefly and then tossed it onto the nearby bed before pointing his wand at the still-open door. "***COLLOPORTUS TRIMENDIUM.***" There was a flash of light on the outer threshold of the door before the door itself slammed shut with great force. Then, dozens of locks appeared all around the door frame which then connected themselves to one another with a web of heavy chains. Finally, there was a

flash of light to indicate a magical barrier on the interior of the room.

"If I am still allowed to give points, Mr. Potter, then take five for Slytherin House. You performed admirably and have clearly learned a great deal this year. There is no shame in losing to a much more experienced opponent, particularly when you have had no opportunity to plan ahead. And *especially* when your opponent is also your combat magic instructor.

"What are you *doing*?!" exclaimed Harry angrily as he struggled in his bonds.

"Escaping, Mr. Potter. Even after the aurors get past the Fiendfyre, they must still get through the Colloportus Trimendium. The Three-Fold Locking spell, one of the most complicated door-sealing wards I know of. It is very unlikely that your father will get through that door before I exit the stage with my usual dramatic flair."

"No, not... I mean why have you been doing all the things you've been doing. The petrifications. The ... other stuff. Why?!"

Lockhart shrugged with a cheery smile. "Why ask why, Mr. Potter? Perhaps its as the Bard said. '*In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain.*' You know, for a Muggle, Old Billy Shakespeare really had a way with words. *ha-Ha!*" And then, to Harry's amazement, Lockhart's annoying laugh continued until it became a deranged cackle. "AH-HA, HA-HA-HA, BWA-HA-HA!"

Harry shook his head as if to clear it. The man's behavior was becoming so bizarre, so out of step with his carefully constructed image, that Harry wondered briefly if one or

both of them had gotten a concussion during their earlier duel. Then, Harry's attention was refocused by the enormous BOOM caused by the sealed door to the room being blasted off its hinges to land on the floor.

"Harry!" James yelled almost in a panic. But then, as he tried to enter the room, there was a flash of light, and he was repelled by the last layer of the Three-Fold Locking Spell. He pounded on the barrier impotently with his fist. "Proudfoot! Savage! Get this last ward down, NOW! Harry! Are you okay, son?!"

"I'm okay... for the moment, I guess!"

"Your precious spawn is fine, *Potter*. I've already had enough fun trying to kill him for one year!"

Harry's head whipped around back towards the DADA instructor at that comment. "What?!"

"Yes, you *fools*! It was I! **I** was the one who petrified those students and then Dumbledore! **I** was the one responsible for locker room prank that led to Harry Potter and his Quidditch team-mates nearly dying of exposure! **I** was the one who used the Imperius Curse on Fred Weasley to force him to cover for me! **I** did it *all*! BWA-HA-HA!"

As the aurors renewed their efforts to get through the final ward, Harry could only stare goggle-eyed and open-mouthed at the DADA instructor, who was once again laughing maniacally.

"**WHAT?!**" he finally shouted in complete consternation. "But ... *why*? Why in Merlin's name would you have done all that!?"



"Forget it, *Potter*," Lockhart spat. "Your pitiful mind cannot comprehend the intricacies of my diabolical genius!"

With that, he turned around to face two large trunks which Harry had not noticed before now and shrank them down small enough to fit into his pockets. As he did, Harry noticed that the man had somehow found the time to heal the cut on his leg and repair the corresponding cut to his trousers. He turned to face Harry once more with a far more relaxed expression.

"Still, fair is fair, I suppose," he said with astonishing reasonableness considering how he'd just been ranting. "Let me assure you, Harry Potter, that I *was not* the person who tried to kill you with the cursed Bludgers during your first Quidditch match, nor was I responsible for the attempts on your life last summer. It appears you have *someone else* who wants you dead as well. Good luck with that."

And with that, he whirled around and pointed his wand at the windows on the other side of the room. "**BOMBARDA!**" There was a tremendous CRASH as the windows exploded outwards. Then, Lockhart snatched up a broom that was laying on the bed next to Harry's wand (and which Harry had *also* not noticed before now) and strode over to the now open windows.

"You may have defeated me *this time*, *Potters*! But I shall return *AND WREAK MY VENGEANCE! BWA-HA-HA!*" As he laughed, the Professor raised his fist and shook it menacingly towards the astonished boy. Then, he mounted his broom and took off out the open window just as the aurors dismantled the last ward and James Potter nearly fell into the room. James ran over to the window but then cursed loudly as Lockhart was already too far away to

target with a spell. He turned back towards Harry, dispelled the boy's magical bonds, and then swept him up into a bone-crushing embrace.

"Harry! Are you okay?! Did that bastard do anything to you?!"

Harry leaned back and stared up into his father's eyes as he tried to process everything that had just happened.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?!" he yelled in utter frustration.

---

While James Potter seemed incredibly relieved that Harry was safe, his relief did not extend to bailing the boy (or his friend Theo) out of trouble. For being out of bounds during a lock-down situation and for interfering with an auror investigation, Harry and Theo were each docked twenty-five points and assigned two weeks of detentions, split between cleaning the now demolished DADA classroom (without magic!) and helping Professor Sprout with the final preparations for harvesting the Mandrakes.

As frustrating as it was, Harry couldn't complain. Plenty of others did, though, as the loss of fifty points knocked the Slytherins all the way down to third place in the House Cup, though they were still far ahead of the hapless Gryffindors. The day had somehow become a replay of the previous year's disaster with Quirrell. Only then, Harry had understood what was happening and been *not* been the one responsible for cocking up Dumbledore's overcomplicated plan for catching Voldemort. That had been Jim's job instead. This year, however, Harry was the one who had been out of the loop and consequently the one to ruin everything. By attempting to break into Lockhart's office

and then setting off his alarm, Harry was responsible for drawing Lockhart away from the Staff Office (where he'd likely have been arrested without incident) and to the DADA classroom (where the aurors found him with his wand already drawn and with two stupid little Second Years to serve as potential hostages). Granted, the school was no longer in danger of closure, and after Harry and James each presented memory-testimonies of Lockhart's confession, the suspension of Fred Weasley would be overturned. But on the whole, it had been a very bad day.

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### ***The Prince's Lair***

***10:00 p.m.***

Later that night, Harry was still upset, even more so after he returned to the Lair to discover that the Hydra *still* wouldn't talk to him. He sat in his chair at the table brooding with Theo and Blaise sitting across from him.

"I just don't understand what Lockhart hoped to accomplish," Harry said tiredly.

"Well," said Blaise. "Look on the bright side. You were right from the start. Lockhart was the bad guy. You get bragging rights for that at least."

"I knew he was untrustworthy," Harry said irritably. "But I never imagined that he would turn into ... whatever that was supposed to be. A cackling loon?"

"Harry," said Theo, who had been listening to variations on this for hours. "Let it go."

"**HE SAID 'BWA-HA-HA!'**" Harry shouted, startling the other two boys. "Who *does* that?! No one in real life goes

into a rant and laughs 'BWA-HA-HA'!? People don't even do that in *books* anymore! Only in *very old movies* where the villain is a cartoon character who fights Flash Gordon or some other rubbish like that!"

Blaise sighed. "Well, did he say anything else? You know, other than BWA-HA-HA?"

"He didn't have time. I got in the room. We dueled for maybe fifteen seconds before he disarmed and bound me. Then, he only had about ten seconds to gloat before my father blew in the door."

Harry looked up and noticed that Theo was staring at him wide-eyed.

"What?" he asked.

"Harry?" Theo said very quietly. "I was in the DADA classroom the whole time. It took your father and the other aurors *at least three minutes* to get the Fiendfyre under control before they could even get to the door, and then another minute or so getting through the first layer of wards. You must have been alone with Lockhart for ... I don't know. Four minutes? Maybe longer?"

Harry stared at his friend for several seconds. "What?" he asked once again, this time in a leaden voice.

Suddenly, Theo reached into his pocket and pulled out the Nott Family Remembrall which he tossed to Harry who caught it easily. The second it touched his hand, the device turned a vivid ... *blue*.

"Okay," Harry said with exaggerated calm. "That's new."

"Red is for erased or altered memories caused by the original Memory Charm spells," said Blaise as he walked around the Hydra to stand over Harry. As Blaise spoke, Harry remembered that the other boy had spent the whole year on Team Recall learning about memory-altering spells. "Blue, on the other hand, represents the more modern Memory Lock series of spells."

Zabini waved his wand over the Remembrall in an intricate pattern, and several ghostly runes appeared above it. The boy studied them for a second with a worried expression on this face.

"Harry," he said, "according to the Remembrall, earlier today you had four minutes and twenty-three seconds of your memories locked away." He took a deep breath. "And you *voluntarily consented* to the procedure."

Harry stared at Blaise for several seconds, and then said the only thing he could think to say, the word that summed up this entire afternoon.

"... what?"

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Lockhart's quote is from the soliloquy of Don John the Bastard in "Much Ado About Nothing" (which incidentally started Kenneth Branagh (Lockhart) as Benedict and Emma Thompson (Trelawney) as Beatrice.

AN 2: Some clever reviewer from a month or so back suggested that Harry summon a snake to talk to the Hydra for him, which had honestly not occurred to me. So I decided that this simple solution wouldn't occur to Harry either until later when someone cleverer than him casually mentioned the idea.

# Endgame (Pt 1)

## Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Spiders

### CHAPTER 40: Endgame (Part 1)

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The astonishing revelations from earlier that afternoon – that Gilderoy Lockhart (a) was a dark wizard (b) who confessed before witnesses to engineering both the petrifications and the locker room prank on the Slytherins (c) before dramatically fleeing Hogwarts – sent shockwaves through the school. At the evening meal, Acting-Headmistress McGonagall made all the relevant announcements, most importantly that the school was no longer in danger of being shut down since the person responsible had been removed for good. Naturally, this led to uproarious applause from the student body and especially from the Gryffindors when it was announced that Fred Weasley would be returning the following morning.

Dinner was followed by one of Gryffindor's legendary parties. Oliver Wood was in high spirits over the news that the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match had been rescheduled for later in the month. Several of the Gryffindors who had openly accused Jim of being the Heir of Slytherin came to apologize, albeit grudgingly, and Jim thanked them politely but tersely in a way that suggested that the matter was forgiven but decidedly not forgotten. And he wasn't even that magnanimous to House-mates like Cormac McLaggen who he'd overheard saying *"At least his brother Harry was out there trying to do something helpful even if he got into trouble for it. I still say they got Sorted wrong."*

Unfortunately, Jim didn't even have the choice of whether to forgive Ron or not. His former friend just gave him a quick glare from across the Common Room before running upstairs without a word. And the saddest part was that after everything, Jim thought he probably *would* forgive Ron in an instant if only the boy would show the common decency to just apologize for the way he'd been acting.

---

Much later, after everyone else had gone to bed. Ron sat in his bed with the diary of Tom Marvolo Riddle clenched his hands.

*"Let me go. Let me go. Let me go."* He whispered over and over to himself for hours, but no one ever responded.

---

There had also been a rather more subdued party in the Slytherin dungeons that night. Once the twin threats of petrification and school closure had apparently been dealt with, Harry's rivals in the House turned their attention to loudly blaming him and Theo for the late term loss of fifty House points. Harry, of course, couldn't care less about the lost House points and withdrew from the Common Room to the Lair with barely a glance towards Cassius Warrington and Miranda Bonneville, who had both recently moved up the rankings on Harry's personal To-Do list.

Later, after the startling discovery that Harry had intentionally allowed Gilderoy Lockhart to block almost four-and-a-half minutes of their conversation from his memories, the three young Slytherins spent another hour in Harry's pensieve reviewing the scene to find the gap. On the fourth repetition, Blaise spotted it. Just before James Potter blasted the door off its hinges and while Lockhart was laughing maniacally, there was the very

slightest *hiccup* in the playback. During one of Lockhart's demented laughs, his body position changed fractionally but instantaneously. Equally telling was when Theo looked out the window and noticed a bird flying by some distance away. At the exact instant of the hiccup, the bird instantly jumped a distance of what looked to be at least a mile.

Unfortunately, knowing where the gap was provided no knowledge of what took place during it. According to Blaise (who had spent most of the year studying Memory Charms in Team Recall), it was absolutely impossible to recover memories sealed with a Memory Lock unless the one who placed it somehow arranged for the recipient to receive the unlock code. Harry remembered the code he picked for Mr. X (the one about Voldemort that he hoped he'd never need to use). Presumably, Lockhart would communicate the code to him at some point, but he wasn't required to, and he might well choose to keep his secret forever. Indeed, if the aurors got to him before he sent Harry the code, the memory might be lost forever regardless of what he wanted.

Tired and annoyed, Harry and his friends left the Lair around midnight just as the party was dying down. Near the entry point for Prefect's Row, they encountered Miranda Bonneville who was waiting for them with her arms crossed and a smug expression on her face.

"Well, well, well!" she sneered. "It's the little Second Years who thought they could capture the DADA instructor! What are you three always doing back there anyway? Flint and Bulstrode just let you three have run of the place! It's pitiful!" Then, she seemed to sneer even harder.

Harry turned to his friends. "Why is it that everyone in this House is always sneering at something? It's very off-putting



plus it loses its effectiveness if you do it all the time. '*You there! Pass me the salt and pepper!*'" Harry gave an exaggerated sneer to accentuate that last command. "We should do something about that."

Bonneville scoffed. "Well, whatever you're doing back there, you can forget about it when I'm Seventh Year prefect. I've got a lot of changes in store for next year." She took a step forward. "And that includes putting a few people who don't know their place ... back into it."

Harry studied the girl ... and then slowly *smiled*. "Look around the room, Bonneville." He gestured around the nearly empty chamber. "Go on. Look. What do you see?"

She looked around carefully. "Just the Common Room."

"Right. Now, I want you to spend the next few minutes studying this room and committing it to memory."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?" she asked warily.

"So that years from now, you can look back and remember this exact second ... *as the moment when everything went horribly wrong*. Good night, Bonneville."

With that, the three boys swept past the furious prefect and headed up to their rooms.

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**9 May 1993**  
**8:00 a.m.**

When Harry awoke early the next morning, he first made his way to the Library to look up the Colloportus Trimendium spell as it was one he never planned to be on the wrong side of again. That accomplished, he made his

way down to the Great hall for breakfast where the entire room was abuzz with excitement. Harry couldn't feel any excitement himself, of course. His detention would begin after lunch: three hours of a lovely Sunday afternoon spent shoveling dragon dung into pots for the final Mandrake repotting prior to their harvest at the end of the month. While he and his peers no longer had to deal with the annoying (and dangerous) little plants directly, Harry thought that might be preferable to handling what was considered the smelliest, most disgusting form of animal waste known to wizard-kind.

As soon as Harry walked into the Great Hall, Marcus Flint called out to him. "Potter! Have you seen the *Prophet* yet?"

"Nope. Anything interesting?"

Flint scoffed and then handed his copy to the boy who opened it to the front page ... and immediately started coughing at the headline.

**SUNDAY PROPHET: SPECIAL EDITION**  
**INSANE GILDEROY LOCKHART CAPTURED!**  
CONFESSES TO BEING HEIR OF SLYTHERIN  
BEFORE MAGICALLY LOBOTOMIZING SELF!

Below the headline was a picture of the man himself in a straightjacket staring vacantly at the camera with a loopy grin on his face and a bit of drool slipping down his chin. Harry sat down to read the story in all its lurid glory. Apparently, after evading a nationwide manhunt (or wizardhunt, as it were), the man showed up early that morning just before dawn at the offices of the *Daily Prophet* in disheveled clothes and carrying a large valise. There, he held the weekend staff members at wandpoint for nearly twenty minutes while he gave a long, rambling (but

surprisingly thorough) confession to the only reporter in the building, a sports columnist who was on hand typing up his commentary on the previous day's Tutshill Tornados-Holyhead Harpies match. Lockhart claimed responsibility for the petrifications and the "Heir of Slytherin" graffiti, which he said was part of his plan to get the school closed "because those weak-minded *fools* didn't appreciate [his] genius!" He also took credit for a malicious prank that nearly led to the deaths of the entire Slytherin Quidditch team, and he confessed to illegally using Memory Charms to erase the memories of dozens of people so that he could take credit for their heroic exploits in what he had falsely claimed were autobiographical books. Last but not least, he also confessed to using Memory Charms to rob people or for "other purposes" which the newspaper would not reveal to protect the innocence of its young readers.

Finally, as aurors drew near to the scene, the cheerful lunatic gave one last jaunty "*ha-Ha!*" before placing his wand to his temple and uttering an obscure Memory Charm so powerful that it left him nearly catatonic. According to medical examination, this state was completely irreversible, as this version of the Memory Charm was the one used in certain foreign countries as a form of non-lethal capital punishment known as "death of personality." After confirming the man's permanent incapacity, the aurors reported that the valise he'd brought with him contained nothing but his last will and testament (which left everything to his longtime manservant, an elderly squib of Asian descent named Cato) as well as drafts of his final DADA exams for all seven years of Hogwarts students. The aurors transported Lockhart to the Janus Thickey Long-Term Care Ward at St. Mungo's Hospital, where he would remain until such time as the Wizengamot ruled on the legality of trying a criminal defendant completely unable to understand what he was on trial for, as well as the ethics of

sending someone to Azkaban who had been reduced to the mental age of a newborn. Ironically, Lockhart himself had recently donated thousands of galleons to the Janus Thickey Ward out of proceeds from special charity reprints of several of his books. Now, it was possible he would spend the rest of his life there.

Harry sat down to the table as he absorbed the information. Between the Memory Lock (which suggested that he talked peacefully with Lockhart for over four minutes in the man's quarters) and the bizarrely over-the-top confessions that Lockhart made both before at the scene and later to the *Prophet* reporters, Harry was now convinced that Lockhart was *innocent* of the various crimes of which he'd confessed. Well, *some* of them, at least. Harry thought that Lockhart definitely gave a false confession to clear Fred Weasley's name and also to delay the Heir of Slytherin's efforts to close the school. Unfortunately, Harry had no proof for that theory, and if Lockhart was a permanent amnesiac, he'd never get any.

Suddenly, he was distracted from his musings by a mighty cheer that rose up from the Gryffindor table. Fred Weasley had just entered the Hall to a standing ovation from his House, followed by hugs from each of his siblings in turn. As Harry observed the Weasley children bonding together, he noticed as Ron and Ginny bumped into each other somewhat awkwardly. Then, impulsively, Ginny pulled Ron into a hug as well, and after a moment's hesitation, Ron hugged her back with a tentative affection. Harry was pleased to see Ginny and Ron getting over their differences ... after he took a few seconds to purge himself of any slight feelings of jealousy of Weasley family's relative closeness. He also spared a glance towards Jim who was watching the Weasleys reconnect with a warm smile and somewhat misty eyes. Shaking off the impulse towards mawkishness that

was suddenly rising within him, Harry turned back to the *Daily Prophet*.

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***Gryffindor Tower***  
***9:30 a.m.***

Ron banged furiously on the door of the room shared by Jim and Neville, but there was no answer. He'd seen both boys leave the Great Hall at around the same time. Surely *one* of them would be here by now. Of course, he had something in his possession that would let him know *exactly* where Jim and Neville were, but he had been afraid to open his bag and check the Map.

Because the Map was right next to the Book.

There was only one book in Ron's life worthy of capital letters. He'd been calling it a notebook, but it wasn't even though Ron had used it for that purpose all year long. But now, perhaps when it was too late, Ron had finally realized that it had used him more than the other way round. An hour earlier while in the embrace of his siblings, an unexpected surge of positive emotions cut through the cobwebs that had been clogging his mind for most of the past year. He didn't know how long this clarity would last, and so, in his desperation, he seized upon an almost infantile belief that formed within him when he was a small child and which had comforted him ever since: that whenever there was evil afoot, the Boy-Who-Lived would be on hand to save the day.

Unfortunately, the Boy-Who-Lived wasn't in at the moment, and no one was there to answer the door. Ron looked up and down the corridor and saw that no one was coming. Grimacing, he dropped down to one knee and carefully

opened his bag. Gently, he tried to pull the Map out without touching the black book, but despite his best efforts, his fingers grazed against its soft leather cover. Ron blinked ... and suddenly he was tightly holding the book in his hands instead of the Map he'd meant to pull out. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to block out that terrible hissing that somehow was at once both inaudible and deafening. He felt something in the back of his mind that tried to dredge up the feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and anger that had festered in him for years. But for once, he could fight back. He focused on the feeling of love he felt when Fred walked into the Great Hall, and the even greater surge of it he felt when Ginny hugged him and let him know that she still cared about him even after how awful he'd been to her this year. This mind-snake hissed angrily.

Ron opened his eyes. The book was still in his hands, and he knew he couldn't resist it for long. He looked over at the door to Jim's room. There was a gap between the floor and the bottom of the door. He took a breath and shoved the notebook underneath the door and into Jim's room.

*"He'll know what to do. He's the Boy-Who-Lived. He'll know what to do."* Ron thought those words over and over like a mantra to drown out the now furious hissing going on in his head. Then, he heard someone coming up the stairs. Quickly, he grabbed his bag, jumped up, and scrambled further up the stairwell towards Percy's private study room. Just a few seconds behind him, Jim came up the stairs, dispelled the locking wards on his room, and entered, closing the door behind him.

Immediately upon entering his dorm room, Jim struck the black notebook with his foot, and it slid across the floor. Surprised, Jim stepped over and picked it up to examine it. He recognized it, of course. Ron had never been without

the notebook into which he had faithfully scribbled everything from class notes to daily schedules to doodles of Gilderoy Lockhart with a comically giant head. But to Jim's surprise, when he flipped through the book now, its pages were blank. He turned back to the cover to inspect it and noticed for the very first time that it had a name engraved on it. *"Tom Marvolo Riddle."*

The name was familiar to Jim, and after a few seconds, he recalled Hagrid mentioning Tom as a good friend back during his school days, the one who mistakenly thought Hagrid was the original Heir of Slytherin and who had inadvertently gotten him expelled as a result. But how did Ron get hold of the man's diary fifty years later? His curiosity overcoming his caution, Jim sat down with the book at a writing desk and opened it again. Then, he took out a quill and an inkpot and started to write, only to pause before the quill touched the page.

*"Why am I writing in the suspiciously empty journal that just appeared in my room and which obviously has something to do with the petrifications from back in 1943 and possibly something to do with why Ron's been acting like a complete prat for these last few months?"*

The boy wavered for a few seconds until a single drop of ink fell from the quill onto the blank page below where it was instantly absorbed completely. Jim gasped at the sudden sensation of ... *something*, and before he could form a coherent thought in response, his fears and cautiousness melted away while a strong sense of curiosity about the book blossomed and took root.

*"Well, it wouldn't hurt to test this thing just a little, I suppose."*

Guided by that impulse, Jim set his quill against the faded paper.

***My name is Jim Potter.***

The ink quickly faded away to be replaced by another message in response.

***Hello, Jim Potter. My name is Tom Riddle.***

That message faded too, leaving a blank page. Excited (and heedless of the faint warning bells in the back of his head), Jim wrote again.

***Do you know anything about the Heir of Slytherin?***

The ink faded, and a single word materialized and then vanished.

***Yes.***

Jim's heart rate speed up in excitement.

***Can you tell me?***

***No... but I can show you.***

Jim dropped the quill in surprise as an unearthly glow erupted from the seam of the opened pages, enveloping him in its light. The next thing he knew he was standing in a different part of Hogwarts, near the main foyer ... and it was suddenly night. Whirling around in confusion, Jim suddenly noticed someone he didn't recognize approaching. It was an older boy, a Fifth Year judging by the prefect's pin on his Slytherin robes.

"Um, excuse me? Do you know how I got here?" The other boy made no sign of having heard him, and when Jim



reached out as the other boy passed, his hand passed right through the boy's arm as if it were intangible. Shocked, Jim followed the boy down the darkened corridor. He paused at the edge of the stairs leading up to the second floor.

Coming down from the second floor were several DMLE officials transporting a levitating stretcher. Jim shuddered. On the stretcher was a body with a sheet over it, female from the look of the hand sticking out.

"Myrtle Warren," Jim said softly. Then, he heard a voice call out "Riddle!" He followed the older boy, who was obviously Tom Riddle himself, up the stairs where he was surprised to see a much younger Dumbledore (relatively speaking - he looked to be about sixty) at the top.

"Professor Dumbledore," Tom replied before ascending the stairs with a humble expression.

"It is not wise to be wandering around this late hour, Tom," Dumbledore said. Jim was surprised by the slight coldness in the man's voice as he spoke.

*"Maybe he mellowed with age,"* Jim thought to himself.

"Yes, Professor," Tom said respectfully. "I suppose I had to see for myself if the rumors were true."

"I'm afraid they are, Tom. They are."

"About the school as well? I don't really have a home to go to. They wouldn't really close Hogwarts, would they, Professor?"

"I understand, Tom," Dumbledore said more gently. "But I'm afraid Headmaster Dippet may have no choice."

"Sir," Tom said slowly, "if it all stopped... If the person responsible was caught...?"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed, and to Jim's surprise, he took a step back from the boy. "Is there something you wish to tell me, Tom?" he asked with obvious suspicion.

Instantly, Tom's face registered complete innocence. "No, sir. Nothing."

Dumbledore stared at the boy for a long time before speaking. "Very good then," he said quietly. "Off you go."

"Good night, sir," Tom said with a respectful nod before leaving Dumbledore.

Jim followed, and to his surprise, the Slytherin headed off not towards the dungeons but towards Gryffindor Tower and eventually to a forgotten set of rooms several floors below it. Tom paused at a door and drew his wand. Then, he took a deep breath and threw the door open. Instantly, Jim realized that it was private room of Rubeus Hagrid, currently a Third Year student segregated from the rest of his House due to bigotry against his half-giant heritage.

Tom entered the room and pointed his wand at Hagrid just as he slammed down the lid on a heavy box.

"I'm going to have to turn you in, Hagrid," Tom said. "I don't think you meant it to kill anyone but ..."

"You can't!" exclaimed Hagrid. "You don't understand!"

"The dead girl's parents will be here tomorrow. The least Hogwarts can do is make sure the thing that killed their daughter is *slaughtered*!"

"It wasn't him," Hagrid pleaded. "Aragog never killed no one. Never!"

"Monsters don't make good pets, Hagrid. Now stand aside!"

"No!" the half-giant begged. Tom pointed his wand at the box.

"***CISTEM APERIO!***" With a flash of light, the lid of the box was blasted off, and Hagrid was flung to the ground. Instantly, a small(ish) Acromantula crawled out of the box and scuttled past Tom and out the door. As it went past, Tom cried out "***ARANIA EXUMAI!***" but his spell missed the creature by a wide margin. Jim's eyes narrowed.

"Aragog!" Hagrid moved to follow the creature but Tom stopped him and held his wand up threateningly.

"I can't let you go, Hagrid. They'll snap your wand for this! You'll be expelled!"

"Hey *Tommy!*" Jim interrupted loudly, as if certain Tom could hear him despite all evidence to the contrary. "You wanna know a secret? I know you Slytherins like to think that all Gryffindors are stupid lunkheads, but believe it or not, it just so happens that we *can* sometimes notice what happens *right in front of us!*"

Tom did not respond but continued to hold Hagrid at bay. Then, Jim moved to stand between Tom and Hagrid so that he could see the boy's face.

"I've *already* talked to Hagrid about these events, and he was convinced you didn't know Aragog was an Acromantula until after he'd already been expelled. *Just now*, though, I *watched* a three-foot diameter spider go *right past you!* You even used Arania Exumai, which is a spell specifically

designed for targeting spiders! Not that it mattered much since I also saw you deliberately miss!"

Jim fixed an angry stare on the other boy who still seemed to pay him no heed.

"You *knew* Hagrid was innocent the whole time! You deliberately *framed him*!"

Finally, Tom's eyes slowly moved off of Hagrid to make contact with Jim's. He smiled cruelly. "Well, well, well. You *are* of clever Lion, Potter, at least by the standards of your *lunkhead* House." As he spoke, the memory of Hagrid faded away along with all the furniture in the room.

"What have you been doing to Ron Weasley?!" Jim asked in a cold angry voice. "Getting inside his head with lies like this?"

"Nothing so elaborate, Potter. Just basic emotional manipulation. Suppress his positive feelings for his family and friends. Heighten his natural insecurity, jealousy, and paranoia. Ironically, getting him to turn against his family was relatively easy. His love for them was no match for the feelings of low self-worth they unwittingly engendered within him with their mixture of unreasonable expectations and benign neglect. No, the *hard part*, Potter, was getting him to turn on *you*!"

Jim's eyes widened, and Tom laughed. "At first, his entire sense of self-worth was bound up in his status as 'Best Friend of the Boy-Who-Lived.' *Thankfully*, you did a wonderful job of instilling a paranoia of all things Slytherin, all things Voldemort, and all things ... *serpentine* into him. When you later revealed your Parseltongue ability as well as the fact that you'd concealed it even from him despite your claims of friendship, *that* finally gave me the opening I

needed to finally assume total control. Ron Weasley is *mine* now to use as I see fit!"

Jim stared grimly at Tom. "You're *awfully* free with your secret information, aren't you, Tom?"

"Why shouldn't I be, Potter?" he asked with a contemptuous sneer. "My plan was to distract you by blaming Hagrid, but I've got a fallback plan as well. You see, you've been in this memory long enough for me to *trap you in here indefinitely!* Your body will lie comatose until *I* release you!" Then, he laughed maliciously.

To Riddle's surprise though, Jim's face registered neither surprise nor fear, but rather a righteous determination. He turned and walked out of the memory of Hagrid's room and down the hall. Then, he turned to stand in front of a bare patch of wall, took a deep breath, and *punched* the wall with his fist as hard as he could. **Thunk.** The boy cried out in pain and shook his hand vigorously. Then, he did it again. **Thunk-ouch!**

Riddle walked up next to him, laughing. "Of course. Typical Gryffindor. You actually think you can punch your way out!"

**Thunk-aah!** Jim paused and turned towards Riddle while massaging his now bloody hand. "Well, *yeah!* I mean, it's a false memory palace, right? That's just a basic Legilimency trap."

Riddle suddenly stopped smiling, and Jim went back to punching the wall while he continued to talk.

"And the way you break out of a false palace..." **Thunk-hiss!** "... is to find a solid wall and start punching it as hard as you can." **Thunk-shit!** "Eventually, your desire to *not* feel your hand hurt anymore from punching the wall will be

stronger than the Legilimens's will to maintain the wall's durability!"

***Thunk-uuh!*** After that last punch, some of the plaster on the wall fell off and dropped to the ground, leaving a spider-web of cracks behind. Jim turned back to the now scowling Tom Riddle with a smile.

"And you know what's really funny, Tom? I learned all that out of a training manual written for Death Eaters!" The boy laughed and returned to punching his fist into the wall. The cracks were spreading noticeably. Riddle said nothing. Instead, he turned away and stared intently, as if looking at something some distance away.

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Ron Weasley sat quietly at the table in Percy's study room fidgeting uncontrollably and occasionally sobbing. Every few minutes he stared at the clock on the wall. 9:50. Percy was supposed to be here at ten o'clock to help him go over some Astronomy homework. When he came, Ron would tell him everything he knew about the Book. He feared that he would be expelled for being so stupid as to not recognize the Book's danger, for letting it manipulate him for so long. And he honestly thought he *should* be expelled for the things he'd done *as pranks* that had been so destructive to everyone in the school (to say nothing of the things he *thought* he'd done but couldn't remember for sure due to what he now knew were Book-induced blackouts).

In particular, he couldn't imagine what he'd ever do to make up for getting Fred kicked out of school. He remembered crying tears of genuine dismay over Fred's expulsion. And then, suddenly, all that stopped. He remembered his sadness melting away and how suddenly *happy* he was over Fred's expulsion. How

... *satisfied* he was to have destroyed his brother by manipulating Fred into taking the blame for a prank that *he* had performed. How *funny* he thought it all was. Now he just felt sick over it. Ron put his hands up to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"I need you to let me back in, Ronald."

Ron looked up in terror. Sitting across the table from him in Percy's chair was ... *another* Ron Weasley. It was like Mirror-Weasley from his nightmare a few nights back, only there was no mirror now. His other self could practically reach out and touch him. Other-Ron's expression was cold and cruel, and his eyes burned red.

"N-no!" Ron said shakily. "G-go away!"

"Please don't make this difficult for us both, Ronald. We've been through so much together this year. We've ... learned so much from one another. I wouldn't say that I'm actually *fond* of you, but it is not my desire to ... well, to *break you irrevocably* unless it's absolutely necessary. Or, I suppose, unless you try to thwart me. I think I might take that personally. So just let me in now without any resistance, and soon we'll be done with this."

"We'll be done sooner than you think!" Ron said defiantly. "Jim has the Book, and he'll figure you out. Or else get it to his dad at the DMLE and *they'll* figure you out. And ... and in just a few minutes, Percy will be here, and I'm gonna tell him *everything*!"

Other-Ron was silent for a few seconds before shaking his head almost sadly. "See, Ron, that's the problem with you Gryffindors. All bully and bluster. A Slytherin would have known better to tell someone who's already under a tight schedule that his time was shorter than he'd thought."

Ron was confused by what Other-Ron was saying. Suddenly, to his surprise, Ron's body and arms suddenly became stuck to the chair as if with a Sticking Charm. He wasn't paralyzed, but he was definitely unable to move. Then, he felt a strange rumbling in his stomach. After a few seconds, the boy felt the familiar watery tickle that preceded a bout of vomiting. But this was different. No bile came pouring up Ron's windpipe. Just an unnatural feeling in his chest of something *crawling* inside him. Ron's eyes widened in horror as his evil twin grinned delightedly. When some tiny wriggling object climbed up his throat and into his mouth, he reflexively spat it out onto the table. It was a wolf spider that bounced once on the table before quickly crawling away.

Wild-eyed, Ron looked back at his doppelganger who was leaning back in his chair as if to watch some amusing spectacle. "YOU BASTARD!" he screamed. "YOU DAMNED BAST—!" His expletive was suddenly cut off into a crude gurgle as the rumbling returned, much stronger. His mouth was forced open by whatever foul magic the Other-Ron was using, and he could feel not one spider, but dozens or more crawling up his throat. He shook his head violently as they poured out of his mouth in waves. When he could draw breath, he just screamed hysterically. And then the next wave came, and the next, one after another and each producing more spiders than the last. Those he could spit out landed on the table or the floor. Most, however, simply crawled out of his mouth and up over his face or down into his clothes. By the fifth wave, something new was added, as tiny louse-sized spiders bypassed his mouth altogether, crawling up through his nasal passages to exit through his nostrils.

"Let me end this, Ron," said Other-Ron, his voice full of compassion. "It pains me to see you suffer like this. Just.



Say. Yes."

By now, Ron was almost past the point of coherent thought. He'd been afraid of spiders since the incident with the Twins when he was a small child. But this? This was horror beyond compare. The part of Ron Weasley that was made of Gryffindor courage fought against the tide, but it was nothing compared to the crushing wave of pure terror that hit Ron every time more spiders crawled out of his screaming gagging mouth. Finally, between waves of spiders and wracking terrified sobs, Ron gave in.

"YESSS! I'LL DO IT! JUST MAKE IT STOP! PLEASESSSE! JUST MAKE IT STOP!"

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Back in the false memory palace within Riddle's diary, Jim was making great progress. There were thick cracks in the wall around an indentation nearly three-feet wide and six-inches deep where the brick and mortar had collapsed. After his last punch, the entire building seemed to shake for a second. And his hand hurt less and less with each blow.

"Stop it, Potter," said Tom in a calm voice.

"Ha, not a chance, Riddle. In a few minutes, I'll be out of here. And within an hour, your little diary will be on my father's desk at the DMLE!"

"I think not," Tom said with sudden confidence.

Jim paused at that and turned towards Tom to see that he had a wand out. "Oh come on, Tom! You know that won't work! Keeping someone locked up in a false memory palace depends on making them believe the palace is real. Casting any kind of harmful spell on me while I'm in here will just makes me wake up faster!"

Tom smirked. "That's very true, Jim. Of spells cast on you ... in here!"

Jim grew wary.

Tom just smiled even more cruelly. "Stupify," he said in a childish sing-song voice and without waving his wand at all. Despite that, everything around Jim turned bright red, and his eyes rolled up back in his head. His knees buckled, but before he could hit the ground, the boy's body vanished from the memory.

---

"Ron Weasley" looked down at the Boy-Who-Was-Sprawled-Unconscious-On-the-Floor with a sinister smile. With a wave of his wand, the door to Jim's dorm room closed. "Ron" knelt to pick up Tom Riddle's diary off the floor to place it inside his backpack. Then, he looked down and coldly regarded the real Ron Weasley's former best friend who had come so close just now to defeating him.

"No more defiance, Ronald. And no more playing around. Time for the endgame."

With that, "Ron Weasley" bent over Jim's unconscious body and tugged on a lock of his hair before casting the Cutting Curse.

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### ***The Hogwarts Grounds***

#### ***1:30 p.m.***

The morning passed uneventfully to Harry, as did lunch, although he was a bit curious when Ginny pointed out that neither Jim nor Ron came down to eat. She wondered hopefully if, after the events of the previous night, Ron had decided to approach Jim and resolve their differences.

Harry nodded without comment. He had a fairly negative opinion of Ron by this point, and if he'd been in Jim's shoes, he wouldn't give Ron the time of day. But he wasn't in Jim's shoes, and he knew that the two had once had a deep friendship before the Dueling Club incident drove them thoroughly apart.

After lunch, Harry and Theo headed off to the greenhouse for their first detention. They were soon joined by Neville and the Weasley Twins. Neville was expected. He was eager to spend some quality time in the greenhouse to do some private work with his beloved plants after months spent quietly serving as Jim Potter's unofficial chaperone for most of every day. The Twins, however, were a surprise.

"So what brings you two to our detention?" Harry asked. "Can't get enough of the enticing bouquet of dragon dung?"

"Nah," said Fred. "We wanted to come along for moral support. Our way of saying thanks for helping to get me back to school."

Harry's eyebrows raised. "How did I do that?"

"Well, the way we hear it, you kept Lockhart busy long enough for your dad to break down the door and witness his confession. If it hadn't been for you suddenly finding your inner Gryffindor, he'd have likely gotten away clean, and no one would ever have known what he did to me."

Harry looked over at Fred curiously. He seemed to be taking the suggestion that he'd been under the Imperius Curse surprisingly well, and Harry said so.

"Honestly," said Fred, "I don't remember him doing anything. Just me deciding it was a good idea to confess to

that prank so George wouldn't get expelled for it. But if Lockhart confessed, he must of done it, right?"

Harry nodded, but privately he wondered who Fred was trying to convince. For his part, George simply looked away, a fact that Harry also noticed. He decided to change the subject.

"Say, Neville, since you're my Herbology guru, maybe you can answer this for me," he began. "Professor Sprout has taught us a lot about how to cultivate Mandrakes and what to use them for, but she's never mentioned what exactly they are or where they come from. I gather they're not actually ... tiny plant-people, but why do they look like they are?"

Fred laughed. "This is just like you were with the garden gnomes last summer. '*Hey Percy? Are these things sentient?*' Heh!" He elbowed George, who smiled but didn't laugh.

"They're not sentient, Harry. Not even close to it. Normal Muggle mandrakes are the roots of the Mandragora plant, and ancient Muggles used them for healing, though they're poisonous if you take too much. Sometime long ago, before the time of Hypatia, some wizard bred a subspecies of magical Mandragora to use as potions ingredients. All the legends about mandrakes actually come from our magical version."

"Okay," said Harry, "but why did the mysterious wizard breed them so that they would imitate the human life cycle? Sprout said a few months back that they were acting like moody teenagers and that they'd probably be throwing wild parties soon."

Neville grimaced a bit and glanced towards the Twins. Even though he'd shared a house with Fred and George for the better part of two years, he still didn't feel like he trusted them the way he did Harry ... and the way Harry obviously trusted them. He took a deep breath.

"Well, she was joking about the parties ... I think. As for the rest, no one knows for sure, but the *theory* is that by making them look like tiny humans and giving them the ability to mimic certain human behaviors ..." he coughed diplomatically, "you get some of the *benefits* of incorporating a human sacrifice into your potion without actually killing anybody."

The other boys were suitably unnerved by that theory, but before they could ask anything more, the group turned the corner to that part of the grounds where the school's greenhouses were located. Just as they did, Harry saw Jim Potter come out of Greenhouse #3, the same one to which they were headed and where the Mandrakes were housed. From a distance, the Boy-Who-Lived turned to look at them with a surprisingly hateful expression. Neville called out to Jim, but the boy turned and walked quickly away without responding.

"Huh," Neville said. "I wonder what he was doing in there. Third Years and below are supposed to stay out of Greenhouse #3 now that the Mandrakes are nearly grown. Safety reasons and all that."

"Except those of us with detention among the deadly killer plants," said Theo. "And you, for some inscrutable reason."

Neville laughed. "I've got special permission to help out with the Mandrakes. Had to get a note from my Gran due to the liability issues. My family already owns one Mandrake

farm down in Australia, and Gran would like to start another somewhere closer to home after I graduate. But you have to be specially certified to get a license to run a Mandrake farm, so I wanted to start as early as possible."

By that point, the group had made it into Greenhouse #3. Immediately, the boys almost gagged from the smell. On the opposite side of the room were five twenty-pound bags of dragon dung and fifty pots to put them in. Harry frowned and cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself before heading across the room. Halfway across, there was a soft flash of light from the floor beneath his feet, and suddenly George Weasley yelled at the top of his lungs.

"HARRY, FREEZE! DON'T TAKE ANOTHER STEP!"

Startled, the others looked at him and saw that George's face had gone pale. He was staring in horror at Harry's feet which they now noticed were surrounded by softly glowing runes he'd unwittingly stepped upon.

'Don't move *a muscle* until I tell you to!' he continued before turning to Fred. "Get Neville and Theo away from here! At least a hundred yards! Then find the first competent teacher you can and get them out here as fast as you can! *Drag* them if you must!"

"George, what...?" Fred started.

"*DO AS I SAY!*" George bellowed in a fury. Fred, who had never been spoken to that way by his twin, looked shocked for a second. Then, he grabbed Neville and Theo by the scruff of their shirts and pulled them out of the room, both of them still calling Harry's name. George then carefully walked around the runes on the floor to the other side so he could face Harry.

"George?" Harry said, quietly but nervously. "What's going on?"

"These, um ... these are ... explosive runes, Harry," George said in a shaky voice. While he was trying to put on a brave face, it was obvious that George was terrified. "I learned about 'em from Lockhart."

Harry paled. "Exactly *how explosive* are we talking about?"

George studied the runes for a second and then looked round the greenhouse. "With all this reactive dragon dung in here? Easily enough to blow up this whole building and everything in it."

"Uh-huh," he said. Harry looked down at the runes and then back at George. "I don't seem to have exploded ... *yet*."

"They're timed." George said without looking up. "You've got just under a minute, but they'll go off instantly if you step off of them. During the Grindelwald War, his Muggle servants dropped leaflets bearing these runes out of aeroplanes over Wizing settlements. If anyone touched the paper ... *Boom*."

Harry nodded. "Nice. And I don't suppose I'd be so lucky that you've actually learned how to disarm them."

"No," said George in a soft voice. "You're not that lucky."

Harry became surprisingly calm despite the news. Perhaps using Occlumency had become reflexive in dangerous situations. Or perhaps the sheer number of assassination attempts against him in the past year had just made him blasé. "Right then. You'd better get out of here and find a teacher. Preferably Snape. No offense, but I think we need

Slytherin cunning in this instance rather than Gryffindor courage."

George looked up from the runes towards the greenhouse's glass ceiling before taking a deep breath. "I think you need both, mate." And then, he stepped onto the runes to stand right next to Harry.

"*What are you DOING?!*" Harry hissed angrily. "There's no sense in both of us dying!"

"Harry, shut up and do *exactly* as I say!" George said . He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Okay, without moving your feet *at all*, bend your knees and go into a crouch." Harry did so as George matched him. "Good. Now when I tell you to, start counting down from five and when you get to zero, *jump as high as you can*. And once you get off the ground, tuck your legs in as much as possible."

Confused but desperate, Harry nodded, and when George gave the signal, he began counting down while George continued to grip his shoulder with one hand while bearing his wand aloft with the other. Just as Harry got down to "one," George started his wand motion. And just as Harry said "zero," George yelled out "***PROTEGO ORBIS!***"

As the two boys jumped up, the explosive runes flared to life. Simultaneously, George slashed his wand down, and a modified Protego shield shot down beneath them before wrapping itself up and around them into the shape of a protective sphere. A millisecond later, the runes erupted. Harry could see the flames all around them even as the explosive force caused the sphere to shoot up like a cannonball through the glass ceiling. Greenhouse #3 blew sky high, raining down broken glass and the screaming mutilated remains of fifty burning Mandrakes upon the area



below. Luckily, no one was nearby to be harmed by the plants' death cries.

Nearly a thousand feet above, George and Harry's protective orb reached its apogee and then fell back towards the ground. Inside, George hissed in pain from the stress of maintaining and controlling the shield despite the damage inflicted upon it. With some difficulty, he was able to slow the orb's descent and even "pilot" it so that it landed some distance away from the ruins of Greenhouse #3. Unfortunately, the two were still nearly twenty feet off the ground when his concentration finally broke. The two fell the rest of the way to Earth and landed rather hard. Harry heard a snap from somewhere in the vicinity of his left elbow. Then, everything went black.

Minutes later, students were gathered around the fallen duo. Several prefects were on hand to make sure no one touched the two unconscious boys, though Marcus was quick to perform diagnostic Charms to make sure they were not in imminent danger of death.

"Somebody go get Madam Pomfrey," he yelled to the crowd.

"And while you're at it," said Theo Nott with a murderous expression, "somebody find Jim Potter!"

But no one did, at least not at first. For at that moment, the Boy-Who-Lived was lying unconscious on the floor of a seldom-used broom closet on the top floor of Gryffindor Tower – bound, wandless, and completely oblivious to the trouble he was now in.

# **Endgame (Pt 2)**

## **CHAPTER 41: Endgame (Part 2)**

**9 May 1993**

**Gryffindor Tower**

**2:15 p.m.**

In the aftermath of Greenhouse #3's destruction (along with that of the entire Mandrake crop), the student body, which had only begun to relax after Gilderoy Lockhart's capture, promptly went into panic mode once more. The school was rife with theories as to what had happened. Some thought it was a parting gift from the deranged former-DADA instructor. Others thought it was a Weasley Terror prank gone wrong. But those who still suspected Jim Potter of being the Heir of Slytherin made much of the fact that he had been seen leaving Greenhouse #3 moments before the explosion. That faction only grew as time passed and Jim remained conspicuously missing. At 2:00 p.m., McGonagall made a school-wide announcement that students were to remain in the castle for the remainder of the day (though they were not yet confined to their dormitories) and that there would be a mandatory Staff Meeting at 3:00 p.m. once Professor Sprout had finished her inspection of the ruined greenhouse and Professor McGonagall had consulted with the Ministry, the DMLE, and (for some reason) the Sorting Hat.

Meanwhile, Percy Weasley was in panic mode for a different reason. No one had seen Ron since breakfast, and with everything else that had happened, his absence was now officially alarming. After finishing a circuit of the Hogwarts grounds without finding his youngest brother, Percy returned to Gryffindor Tower to check there again. Ron's

dorm room was empty, so Percy decided to check his own private study once more. As soon as he was inside, the door slammed shut behind him. Percy whirled around and his eyes widened.

It was Jim Potter pointing a wand at him and bearing a crazed look in his eye.

"Potter!" the prefect exclaimed. "What is the meaning of this?!"

"I don't know, Percy, old chap. What does it look like?" Jim smiled lazily at him while gesturing with his wand for Percy to move away from the door. Percy complied.

The young prefect said nothing for several seconds as he studied Jim to determine if he might be able to get a jump on the boy. But Percy Weasley, by his own admission, was more of an scholar than a warrior, and he certainly lacked the intensive combat training for which the Boy-Who-Lived was somewhat famous.

"You've never really liked me, have you, Percy?" Jim asked with a smirk. "Never. Why is that? I was friends with Ron and the Twins, after all."

Percy raised his nose somewhat haughtily. "To be honest, *Potter*, I thought you were a bad influence on Ron. Frankly, I wish I'd done more to separate you two."

Jim laughed. "I'm a *bad influence* on Ron. Oh, Percy. You have *no idea*."

Percy scowled and remembered that Ron had been missing all day. "What have you done with Ron, you little monster!?"

"Honestly, Perfect Prefect Percy?" Jim said with a malicious smirk. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Furious at the thought of his youngest brother at the hands of the mad child in front of him, Percy snarled and reached for his wand while attempting to dodge any attack as he did. He never stood a chance. A Banishing Charm sent Percy flying across the room into a wall, and then a Stunner left him out cold. Satisfied, the boy moved over to the desk and pulled out a quill and a sheet of parchment. As he wrote, the boy idly whistled to himself - "*God Save the Queen*." When he was done writing, he moved over to Percy's prone body where he took possession of the other boy's wand before ripping the prefect pin off of his robe and attaching it to his own. Then, the Boy-Who-Lived reached down to grab a lock of the boy's curly red hair.

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### ***The Gryffindor Common Room*** ***2:20 p.m.***

Percy Weasley exited his private study and then sealed the door with a powerful locking Charm before heading down to the Common Room, still softly whistling the same tune. Just as he arrived, Head Girl Emily Rossum entered through the main door.

"Ah, Emily!" he said. "Has Professor McGonagall spoken to you about the meeting?"

"What meeting?" she asked in confusion.

"Obviously not, I see." The boy pulled a parchment out of the book bag he now carried and handed it over to the girl. On it was a list of names with hers at the top. "She wants these students to come to the Staff Room for the faculty meeting. All the Seventh Year prefects plus a few younger

students who she wants to question, presumably about the explosion in the greenhouse."

Emily studied the list. "Very well. I'll go and tell Hermione and Luna. I believe Neville and Fred are in the infirmary, watching over Harry and George, though I don't know if the latter two will be up for any meetings. Would you mind letting them know?"

"Sure," Percy said with any unusually winning smile. "I wanted to check in on George anyway. Would you mind letting the Ravenclaw prefects know? I'll inform the Slytherins."

She nodded and looked over the list. "Sure thing. I believe you'll find Nott and Zabini in the also infirmary watching over Harry Potter. They're a rather tight-knit circle."

"That they are, Emily," Percy said still with an oddly intense smile. "That they are."

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### ***The Infirmary***

#### ***2:30 p.m.***

Harry woke to the sight of bright lights bearing down upon him and a powerful sense of déjà vu. Opening his eyes, he looked around and saw that he was in the infirmary. Specifically, he was in the exact same bed he woke up in after his Quidditch injury the previous fall and which, ironically, was also the same one he occupied for several days after his run-in with Voldemort months before that.

"*Heh. They should probably put a placard over this bed with my name on it,*" he thought to himself. Glancing around, he saw that one Weasley Twin (presumably George) was lying unconscious in the bed next to him, with the other

twin (presumably Fred) sitting nearby looking pensive. "Presumably" in both cases because Harry wasn't in a position to see which one had a mole, although it was probable that the one who had been shot out of Greenhouse #3 like a cannonball was the one who was injured. Ginny Weasley was standing next to the conscious twin with her arm around his shoulder. Looking around, he also saw that Theo, Blaise, Neville, and Marcus Flint were all also present and playing cards at a nearby table. He assumed it was Exploding Snap at first until he noticed that none of the cards were exploding. Then, he realized that Blaise was teaching them how to play poker.

"You know, Neville," he said. "If you let Blaise Zabini steal the Longbottom family fortune with his card sharpening skills, your Gran will never let either of us hear the end of it."

"Harry!" Neville said excitedly.

"Oh good," said Blaise cheekily as he checked his watch. "You're awake after just one hour. I think that means I win the betting pool."

Harry ignored Zabini and turned his attention towards Fred. "How's George?"

Fred looked over at Harry with an unreadable expression. "Pomfrey says he'll be okay in a day or so, but he's having some bones regrown right now, so she's got him knocked out for the time being."

Harry nodded and studied the face of the unconscious twin. Like most Slytherins, Harry had spent a good amount of time mocking the idea of "Gryffindor courage." While he thought his friends Neville and Hermione could act with complete fearlessness when moved to do so, on the whole he'd always considered the typical Gryffindor to be mostly

talk with little to back it up. And yet George Wesley, a boy with whom he'd had a cordial but not entirely friendly relationship, had without a second thought risked his life to save Harry's. It was a rather sobering thought that forced Harry to reevaluate his attitudes towards the House of the Brave.

*"Not to mention the fact that I now probably owe George Weasley a life debt,"* Harry thought somewhat ruefully. *"Which means I need to spend some time in the Library to figure out what the heck life debts are and how they work."*

"Alright then, somebody fill me in on what I've missed," Harry said to the group. And in due course, Theo and Blaise gave him the rundown. The Mandrake crop was totally destroyed which meant there was no immediate way to revive the petrification victims, including Albus Dumbledore (who would likely be replaced in all of his positions if he weren't revived relatively soon). Gilderoy Lockhart was the person who originally brought explosive runes into Hogwarts, and while he provided a copy to George Weasley, it was unknown if he'd done so for any other students. Finally, neither Jim Potter nor Ron Weasley had been seen since that morning.

"Say, Neville," Harry asked. "What about the Mandrake farm your family owns in Australia?"

"I've already mentioned that to Professor Sprout," Neville replied. "Unfortunately, because it's in the Southern Hemisphere, there are different constellations that govern the growing season, so they won't be ready for harvest before late August."

Before they could discuss the matter any further, Percy arrived to inform the group that everyone present except

Ginny was to come to the Staff Room at 3:00 to answer questions about what they knew about the explosion at Greenhouse #3.

"Why do I have to come?" asked Blaise in confusion. "I wasn't even there."

Percy shrugged. "Your name was on the list McGonagall gave me." He turned to Fred. "How is George?"

But before Fred could answer, Madam Pomfrey arrived to do so for him. "George Weasley will be confined to his bed for at least another day. Mr. Potter, I'll be performing a final check-up on *you* in just a moment, and if everything looks alright, you're free to go. The rest of you – OUT!"

With some grumbling, the students left the infirmary. Not long after, Madam Pomfrey completed her examination of Harry and told him to get dressed. Then, she turned her attention to George while he did so. After a few minutes spent on diagnostic spells, she cast a Renervate to wake the boy up so she could ask him how he was feeling. The boy replied that he felt fine other than a slight headache and an extremely unpleasant itching from his legs. Pomfrey explained that he hit the ground feet first, shattering the bones in his feet and shins. Because of the extent of the damage, she elected to vanish those bones and then replace them through the use of Skele-Gro. She then left to procure some pain-relieving potions, leaving Harry and George alone together.

"So," Harry started somewhat hesitantly, "Protego Orbis. What's that about? I've never heard of that spell."

"Oh, it gets covered in the Third Year DADA books," he explained. "It's a pretty easy spell – just a standard Protego with the word Orbis added at the end and a second flick



added to the wand movement." He demonstrated with his finger. "It's mainly useful for carrying fragile things around that you are worried about getting broken. Me and Fred got detention last year for floating our books around in levitating orbs from class to class. The downside is that damage to the orb translates into both magical drain and physical pain on the caster which is why I blacked out. I could feel the damage of the explosion even if neither of us actually suffered it. Honestly, unless you've got something really valuable to tote around, a protective orb's mainly just for showing off."

"Except for the bit where you can cast the orb around yourself and ride out an explosion."

"Yeah," said George with a grin. "That was pleasantly convenient."

Harry stared at George for several seconds as he absorbed that. "You had *no idea* whether the spell would even work or not when you cast it that way, did you?" he asked in amazement.

George shrugged almost bashfully. "Well, I *thought* it would probably work that way. Would have been bloody embarrassing if it hadn't, I guess."

"George ..."

"Harry, let it go. You saved Ron last year. You helped Ginny fit in within Slytherin House. And you helped get Fred back. We're even." Then, the boy laid back (wincing in pain as he did) and closed his eyes to rest. Harry continued to study him until Pomfrey shooed him out.

"*No, George, we're not even,*" Harry thought as he left.  
"*Not by a long shot.*"

---

***Outside the Infirmary***  
***2:45 p.m.***

Harry found Neville waiting for him in the corridor.

"Where's everyone else?" he asked.

"Flint, Theo, and Blaise headed on back to the dungeon until the meeting. Ginny's off to the Library. Fred went to owl home to let them know what had happened and that George was okay. We've got about fifteen minutes before we meet with the staff, so I thought I'd wait for you. What do you think they want with us?"

Harry shrugged. "To collect pensieve memories, maybe?"

"Harry, do you really think Jim was behind this?"

"I don't know. I mean, Jim and explosive runes? Does he know *anything* about runic magic?"

Neville didn't know. He also didn't know much about life debts which Harry quizzed him about thoroughly. The two friends had made their way to the otherwise empty Great Hall to kill time before McGonagall's meeting started. Neville knew that life debts existed as a concept but wasn't sure if they were actual magical things or simply strong social conventions. And even according to the few stories he'd heard suggesting life debts *weremagical* things, the descriptions were vague. To earn a life debt, you had to save someone else from certain death with no assistance from anyone else and under circumstances where no one else around could have done so in your place. That was why, for instance, Neville never owed Harry a life debt over the troll incident or the confrontation with Quirrell – there were too many people who played a part in saving everyone one

else for the one-on-one requirements of the life debt to be satisfied. Beyond that, Neville didn't really know anything else, but he thought his Gran might.

Then, Neville looked up suddenly. "Owl," he said pointing at the open window. Harry turned around in surprise and saw a postal owl gliding in their direction. It landed gracefully between the two and extended a talon towards Harry, who gingerly took the attached letter from the bird. It then flew off majestically as he examined the letter.

*To: Harry Potter  
From: Magical Me*

"Harry? What is it?" Neville asked somewhat nervously in response to the shocked look on Harry's face.

Harry didn't answer. Instead, after a few seconds of hesitation, he impulsively ripped open the envelope and dumped its contents onto the table. There two items inside. One, to Harry's surprise, was a pass to the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library with his name printed on it. It was signed by Gilderoy Lockhart and backdated to before his departure from the school. The other item was a folded piece of parchment. Harry carefully opened it up and read the message inside ... before swooning and then falling backwards onto the floor as Neville excitedly called his name.

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### ***The previous day...***

*Lockhart shrugged with a cheery smile. "Why ask why, Mr. Potter? Perhaps its as the Bard said. 'In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain.' You know, for a Muggle, Old Billy Shakespeare really had a way with*

*words. ha-Ha!" And then, to Harry's amazement, Lockhart's annoying laugh continued until it became a deranged cackle. "AH-HA, HA-HA-HA, BWA-HA-HA!"*

Then, in a blur of motion, Lockhart whipped his wand towards Harry, his laughter suddenly gone and replaced by a look of intense focus. "**MNEMOCRYPsis ALPHA.**" he intoned, and a burst of light shot from his wand to strike the bound and incapacitated Harry Potter.

"What ... what was that?!" asked the frightened boy who didn't recognize the spell.

"It's the first half of a Memory Lock Charm," the man said before calmly healing the cut to his leg with an Episkey Charm and then fixing the tear in his trousers with a Reparo. "It's a two-part spell. When we're done talking and I'm ready for my exciting departure, I'll resume my position over here and start laughing maniacally again as soon as I cast the second part. Your memory *should* edit the images of me cackling like a madman together so as to paper over the gap in your memories of our little chat."

"That spell requires me to consent to having my memories locked," Harry said in an angry clipped voice. "What makes you think I'll do so?"

"Well for starters," Lockhart replied, "it's the only way you'll ever find out what's actually going on around here." As the man spoke, he began to wave his wand about the room. Two large steamer trunks slid over next to him and opened themselves, and then various items began to fly off the shelves into the waiting luggage.

"I reckon the other professors can figure out your game, Lockhart. I mean, Snape already figured out you were a fraud by himself."

"Ah, Severus. Such a brilliant and cunning mind, truly worthy of Slytherin. But no, Potter. Severus Snape, despite his many gifts, is simply not on our level." Lockhart hesitated. "Well, not on *my* level, at least. I'd previously thought that you held great promise, Potter, but frankly, I'm dismayed by the pitiful level of two-dimensional thinking you've shown today."

"Two ... dimensional?!" Harry sputtered, his anger over having his cunning disparaged overtaking his fear for his life.

"Yes!" Lockhart said almost angrily. "*Two-dimensional!* You *know* that some mysterious person is running around the school petrifying people. And you *know* the Defense instructor is mysterious and probably has ulterior motives. And since, in your mind, Hogwarts *can't possibly* maintain more than one conspiracy at a time, you naturally *assume* that the Defense instructor is the one doing the petrifying. *Two-dimensional!*"

Lockhart paused to cast a spell at one of the walls, and a portal appeared leading to the next room. With another wand movement from him, items from that room began to fly in and into the open trunks, mainly locked boxes marked with the names of several of the man's research teams. In particular, Harry noticed the one for Team Chameleon which he knew contained several months' worth of Polyjuice Potions. He wondered why the aurors couldn't just get in through that room, but then realized that it was probably warded as well.

"Wheels within wheels, Potter," Lockhart continued as he worked. "There are more conspiracies active in this school and in the world outside of it than you or I could fully comprehend in a hundred lifetimes. Cuthbert Binns has

been *dead* for over a hundred years, and even *he* has his own agenda! So let me spell it out for you, Potter. I *am* a fraud. I *am* at Hogwarts under false pretenses. *But* I had *nothing* to do with the petrifications and, as a matter of fact, have been investigating them myself in secret. And thanks to a conversation I happened to overhear this morning followed by a few hours spent researching in the Library, I now know how the petrifications were accomplished which, frankly, is more than anyone else has figured out so far."

"How?" Harry demanded.

"I have no intention of sharing the fruits of my investigation with someone I cannot trust," Lockhart said calmly.

"*You ... you don't think you can trust me?!"* Harry said in disbelief. "You're the one who unleashed *Fiendfyre* in a *school!*"

"Fiendfyre under controlled circumstances and in a magically-reinforced DADA classroom containing a squad of highly-trained aurors. They'll have that firewall down any second now."

Harry didn't respond, and Lockhart grew visibly frustrated.

"Time is *short*, Potter, and I don't just mean in this room! Your true enemy has not yet revealed himself *but he will very soon now*. The fact that the Heir of Slytherin was so bold as to strike down the Headmaster himself means that his plans are nearing their fruition and that he no longer fears the Ministry itself becoming involved! And within minutes, I will be forced out of Hogwarts before I can solve the mystery of who our secret enemy truly is. I *need* someone on the inside I can count on!"

Harry stared at the man, distrust still obvious on his face. Lockhart sighed and spoke more calmly.

"Harry, '*never trust anyone*' is Rule Number One for any good Slytherin. *I know that*. But the *best* Slytherins also know that there is a time to set Rule Number One aside and go with your gut instinct. I may have misled you about my nature and my intentions this year, but I also trusted you with knowledge of a spell outlawed by the highest levels of our government. I believed that you could summon a Patronus when everyone else *laughed* at the idea of a Second Year doing so, and while you've not mastered it yet, you've already come closer to a corporeal Patronus than most adult wizards. *And* I taught you how to fight with Averno so well that you could duel *me* more effectively than most of those so-called aurors your father brought as back-up. Now, I won't insult you by asking what your *heart* is telling you, but what about your *instincts*? Your *cunning*?"

Harry glared at the man as seconds ticked by. Then, a light flashed across the surface of the door.

"That's the aurors, Harry. They've already vanquished the Fiendfyre and are now attacking the exterior ward. That will take a minute at most. What say you?"

The boy was silent for another few precious seconds. "What do you want me to do?" he finally said quietly. Lockhart picked Harry's wand up off the bed and handed it to him, leaving himself completely open to attack in the process.

"Verbally consent to the memory lock and then say '*so mote it be*.'"

For another three precious seconds, Harry waited while considering whether he could take down the man despite being bound himself. The intelligent part of him said it was

pointless to try. And some other part of him that he couldn't quite identify but suspected was his "gut" didn't even want to.

"I freely consent to the Obliviation of my memories of everything that has occurred from the time the memory lock spell was initiated the memory lock spell until such time as it is completed. So mote it be."

There was a flash of light from Harry's wand. "Thank you," Lockhart said before taking the wand back and putting it back on the bed. Then, he summoned a racing broom from the back of the room and left it next to the wand. Finally, he snatched up a quill from the desk nearby and dashed off a quick message onto some parchment. He moved back to where Harry lay bound and held it up so the boy could read it.

"The recall code. I'll get it to you as soon as I possibly can."

Harry's eyes widened in shock as he read the message. "What?! The answer was *there whole time*?! Are you *serious*?"

Lockhart laughed loudly as he folded up the note and put it into his pocket. "No, but I *am* being truthful." Then, he moved back to where he'd been standing when he first cast the memory lock spell. "Good luck, Harry. **MNEMOCRYSIS OMEGA!**"

*Harry shook his head as if to clear it. The man's behavior was becoming so bizarre, so out of step with his carefully constructed image, that Harry wondered briefly if one or both of them had gotten a concussion during their earlier duel. Then, his attention was refocused by the enormous BOOM as the sealed door to the room was blasted off its hinges to land on the floor.*



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***Three seconds after Harry read the note...***

"Harry!" Neville cried out as he ran around the table to help his friend up.

"I... remember," Harry said dazedly.

"What? What do you remember?"

"Everything," the boy said. Then, he cleared his head and looked towards Neville. "I know how people have been getting petrified. Go to the Staff Meeting. Tell McGonagall and Snape that I'll be there as soon as I can." With that, Harry pulled away from Neville and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?!" Neville exclaimed.

"The Library!" Harry replied. "Some last minute research!" And with that, he was off, running for the Library as fast as he could. In one hand, he clutched the pass to the Restricted Section which he hoped was still valid. In the other, he held a scrap of parchment upon which the recall code for the memory lock was written:

***Hogwarts: A History , 1 st Edition (publ. 1485)***  
***Chapter 14, Page 193 - "Slytherin's Basilisk"***

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***The Staff Room***  
***2:55 p.m.***

As Professor Flitwick made his way to the Staff Room, he was surprised to find a large group of students waiting outside the door. In addition to the Head Boy and Girl and all the Seventh Year prefects, the other attendees included

Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, Padma Patil, Theo Nott and Blaise Zabini. It was a rather crowded hallway.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Flitwick. "What are all you students doing here?"

"Professor McGonagall sent for us, sir," said Emily Rossum. "Percy Weasley brought me a list of students she wanted to see. Everyone's here but Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom, and the Weasley Twins, though I think George Weasley is still bed-ridden."

"Really? Professor McGonagall didn't mention anything about this to me," he replied. "Oh well, best come on in so we can find out what's going on."

With that, Flitwick opened the door and led the group of students inside. Immediately, Severus Snape objected, but Flitwick merely shrugged and said "Minerva wanted them here," as he conjured up chairs for the students. Just as he was about to close the door, Neville came running up.

"Sorry I'm late, Professor Flitwick," he said breathlessly. "Harry Potter's on his way. He had to stop off at the Library."

Flitwick sighed. "That's quite alright, Mr. Longbottom. Just take a seat next to your peers. Professor McGonagall is running late as well."

At that news, Professor Kettleburn rose from his own seat and headed towards the door marked *Wizards*. "Well," he said irritably, "if Minerva's going to be late anyway, then I'm heading to the loo!"

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## ***The Library***

***2:57 p.m.***

Irma Pince studied the pass with a dubious expression. "This was signed by Professor Lockhart," she said, stating the obvious. "He doesn't teach here anymore. On account of, you know, him being evil or something."

Harry suppressed his annoyance. The Librarian was his least favorite member of the Hogwarts staff, even worse than Binns. He was convinced that if the bitter old woman had her way, no one at all would ever be allowed in the Library so she could hoard all the precious books to herself while residing in a domain of perfect, uninterrupted silence. The Slytherin pasted on his most charming smile.

"Yes, Madam Pince, I do know that. However, if you will note the date, this was issued several weeks *before* Professor Lockhart's removal. And the book I'm after is necessary for a class project that is ... vital to my academic future."

"What is it? You're far too young for anything dark."

"It's not a dark book, Madam Pince. It's not even a magical book. It's only in the Restricted Section because it's very old and, I assume, very valuable."

Pince looked down at Harry doubtfully. "Which book?"

He handed her the scrap of parchment with the book's name written on it in Lockhart's hand. The Librarian crooked an eyebrow at him and then directed him to a small side room. "Wait in there. Touch nothing."

Surprised, Harry did as instructed and headed towards a nearby reading room, pausing just long enough to wave to Ginny and Amy who were across the Library and following

his movements with obvious curiosity. Once inside the room, Harry was surprised by its design. It was a ten-foot diameter circular room with a high domed ceiling and completely devoid of furniture other than a bright-red metallic lectern in the center. Except for that splash of color, every inch of the room was gleaming white. Strangest of all, while the room was brightly lit, there wasn't actually any visible light source. A few minutes later, Pince returned with a thick old book floating behind her in a Protego Orb. She floated the book down onto the lectern and then handed Harry a small black bag containing a pair of white silk gloves and what looked like a white surgical face mask.

"You will wear these at all times while handling the book. Under *no* circumstances will you allow any contamination to the book. You *may* use the Gemino Charm to copy relevant passages but no more than ten pages in a single sitting. Any more might damage the book. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said in a respectful voice.

She glared at him for some inexplicable reason and then left the room. Harry exhaled and carefully opened the book to page 193 and began magically copying the ancient yellowed text.

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***A seldom used storage closet in Gryffindor Tower***  
***2:59 p.m.***

Jim Potter finally came to and found himself bound and gagged in a dark room, a cleaning supply closet of some kind if the smell was any clue. He struggled in a panic for almost twenty seconds before he got hold of himself and focused. He knew he'd been stunned, and he feared that his attacker could only have been one person: Ron Weasley,

who had been Tom Riddle's thrall for months. Jim cursed himself for his stupidity and self-centeredness. He should have spotted the signs of psychic manipulation in his best friend months before. Or, failing that, he should have been honest with his best friend about being a Parselmouth and thus denied Riddle an opening to turn Ron against him. Jim promised himself that if he got out of his current predicament, he'd save Ron somehow and make it all up to him.

"*But first things first,*" he thought to himself. Jim quickly realized that he'd been bound with the Incarcerous spell which summoned magical ropes to tie up the spell's target. Few people were able to break out of the spell's bindings. But then, few people were the Boy-Who-Lived, and after getting tied up with this same spell the previous spring by Quirinus Quirrell, Jim had developed a strong interest in the field of Muggle escapology. He began to twist around on the floor until he could get a better handle on the ropes which bound him. He could free himself if only he had the time, but he feared that was one advantage he didn't have.

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### ***The Staff Room***

***3:05 p.m.***

Minerva McGonagall entered the Staff Room obviously flustered and annoyed. Lily Potter met her at the door.

"Well, Minerva? Are the aurors coming?" she asked.

"No, Lily, they are not!" she said angrily. "I sat with that wretched *Hat* on my head for twenty minutes trying to make it see reason, but to no avail. Unfortunately, my status is *merely* that of *Acting*-Headmistress, and so I lack authority to suppress the castle's wards in any way. I can't

even open up the Floo for even one auror to step through. Not even James Potter, and he's a *parent*. And that will *remain* the case until Albus has been incapacitated for a period of no less than 72 hours! *Honestly!* It is *intolerable* that we should live in the year 1993 and still be bound by enchantments and bindings that were placed upon the castle to fight off invading armies and which have been unchanged since *before the Norman Conquest!*"

At that, Minerva finally noticed that there were over a dozen students crammed into the room along with the faculty members.

"AND *WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME ARE THESE STUDENTS DOING IN HERE?!*" she shrieked in a fury.

A sudden silence fell over the room as the student visitors looked back and forth at one another nervously.

"Never mind that," said Silvanus Kettleburn. "All the male faculty members are in here, so who's locked up in the men's toilet when *I've got to spend a penny!*"

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## ***The Library***

### ***3:06 p.m***

Having copied the relevant material from the very first edition of the school's ancient and storied history, Harry carried the pages out and found a table to do a quick read-through before presenting his findings to McGonagall. He would also need a plausible explanation of how he got the information (since "the apparently insane ex-DADA instructor told me" probably wouldn't fly), but one problem at a time. As he was scanning the information, Ginny and Amy came over to join him.

"You seem unusually intense, Potter," said Amy. "What's up?"

He looked up at the two girls with a satisfied expression. "I know how people are being petrified. Or more accurately, I know *what's* petrifying people. Now, I just need to figure out who's controlling the blasted thing."

Ginny and Amy looked at one another for a second. Then, without even asking permission, they moved around the table so that each could read the copied papers over Harry's shoulders.

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***From Hogwart's: A History , 1 st Edition, Chapter 14,  
page 193***

*As Hogwart's neared the end of its first decade, the Founders were finally forced to turn their attention from matters of curriculum and school discipline to the more vexing matter of external defense. In those dark times, England was riven by magical dangers. Giants stalked the lands in sizeable numbers, while dragons still roamed the skies. Bands of trolls engaged in brigandry and violence. The goblins were ever restive in their caverns, and the Wizarding Council which would one day become the Wizengamot was ever reckless in challenging the goblins' autonomy. Finally, in the last years of the First Millennium Anno Domini, no less than three Dark Lords plagued England and threatened conquest against Hogwarts, though each of their armies in turn was forced back by the Founders' puissance. Nevertheless, the Founders agreed that the castle needed permanent defenses.*

*To that end, Lord Gryffindor had his goblin allies forge a magnificent sword, shield, helm and suit of armor which*

would be worn by the bravest of his House into battle against any attackers (see "Gryffindor's Panoply," page 198), and he also provided the school's many enchanted suits of armor which would follow him into battle if need be (see "Hogwarts' Guardians," Ibid.). Lady Ravenclaw used her peerless knowledge of geomancy to weave wards about the castle's infrastructure unmatched by any manse of the day (see Appendix C for a complete description of the ward scheme as of this writing). Lady Hufflepuff brought a veritable menagerie of magical creatures bound by either oath or treaty to live in the Enchanted Forest and come to Hogwarts' defense if called, and to Black Lake, she summoned a kraken from the bottomless depths of the ocean, bound it to Hogwarts' protection, and gifted it with near-immortality. (For more information, see Appendix F for a complete list of all magical species brought to Hogwarts by Lady Hufflepuff).

But perhaps the most potent, and certainly the most controversial defense, was Lord Slytherin's contribution: the Great Basilisk. For this was no mere death-dealing serpent of the breed first conjured by Herpo the Foul. Slytherin had modified the enchanted egg from whence the King of Serpents would emerge, imbuing it with magical essences drawn from other creatures and granting his creation attributes far different and greater and more useful than that of a lesser basilisk. From a Thracian Gorgon, Slytherin provided his serpent with a gaze that would petrify rather than instantly kill thereby avoiding the risk of slaying friend along with foe in the event of a siege. From a Mountain Troll, Slytherin granted his creation with amazing regenerative powers. From a Welsh Green Dragon, Slytherin covered the King of Serpents with magic-resistant scales. From a Great European Strix, Slytherin blessed his basilisk with the power to move in utter silence as it hunted. From a phoenix...



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***The Staff Room***  
***3:07 p.m.***

"I was given to understand, Minerva," said Professor Flitwick, "that you had requested these students to be here so that we could all interview them."

"I gave no such instructions, Filius! Miss Rossum, explain yourself!"

The Head Girl coughed nervously. "Professor, Percy Weasley came by with a list of students that he said you wanted here for the meeting. It was everyone here, plus Harry Potter and the Weasley Twins."

"I haven't seen Percival Weasley all day! This is most peculiar!"

Snape stiffened. "More than peculiar I think." Then, he turned around to address the entire room. "EVERYONE OUT OF HERE! NOW! STUDENTS AND FACULTY BOTH!"

"Severus, what's wrong?" McGonagall asked with concern. Behind them both, Professor Kettleburn ignored Snape's shouting (or perhaps simply didn't hear it - significant loss of hearing was one of the many disabilities he'd acquired through his decades as a CoMC instructor), as he continued his single-minded obsession with getting into the men's toilet.

"Minerva!" Severus snapped. "*For once*, will you please just trust Slytherin instincts?!"

She hesitated and then nodded. "Everyone, do as Professor Snape says. Leave this room at once!"

Not needing to be told twice, Blaise Zabini (who was armed with excellent Slytherin instincts of his own) was the first at the door. It wouldn't open.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "The door's locked."

Suddenly alarmed, McGonagall pushed past the boy to test the door herself. Her blood ran cold. The door wasn't locked – it was warded shut.

"***ALOHOMORA***," said Kettleburn from the opposite side of the room. The door to the faculty men's room finally swung open. Kettleburn's eyes widened as a deep terrifying hiss suddenly filled the Staff Room.

"*Morgana's saggy ...!*" was as far as the elderly professor got before he fell over backwards onto the floor – petrified.

Then, the screams started.

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***From Hogwart's: A History , 1 st Edition, Chapter 14,  
page 194***

*Designed as a living anti-siege weapon, the Basilisk was in many ways a part of the castle itself. Slytherin's genius made use of sympathetic magic to link the creature with the castle's very infrastructure so that the mighty serpent could travel to wherever it was needed. It could enter the castle's plumbing system at any point and travel to any exit point at the command of its master regardless of the size of the connecting pipes. It could materialize out of a sluice gate that led into the moat or within the Great Black Lake via the conduits that supplied water to the Slytherin dungeons, and by those means, it could flank any armies on the Hogwarts grounds or attack them from the rear. And if Hogwarts itself were ever overrun, the Basilisk could even*

*travel through its interior pipes to strike at will against intruders, entering even the smallest rooms with the aid of size-altering Charms that were a part of its inherent magical nature.*

*Lady Hufflepuff declared herself delighted with Slytherin's Basilisk, for she was known for her peaceable nature and was pleased that the creature could so easily incapacitate the school's enemies without killing them outright. As a gesture of her esteem, she fashioned an enchanted ewer for Lord Slytherin which could facilitate the swift revivification of allies who had been inadvertently petrified and of captured intruders who were wanted for interrogation or ransom. After the legendary Hufflepuff Cup (see page 79), Hufflepuff's Ewer is considered her most ingenious enchantment.*

*Lord Gryffindor and Lady Ravenclaw were less enamored of the Basilisk, however. Ostensibly, they disapproved of the procedures by which the great serpent was birthed, as the magical cross-breeding techniques Slytherin used were (and are) considered inherently dark. Unmoved, Lord Slytherin intimated his belief that Lord Gryffindor and Lady Ravenclaw were simply jealous of how much more impressive an addition the Basilisk was to the castle's defenses than their own offerings, a position which led to much strife among the Founders. Finally, a compromise was reached, and Lord Slytherin made several modifications to the Basilisk's nature, instilling within it certain inherent weaknesses to make it acceptable to his peers ...*

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***The Staff Room***  
***3:09 p.m.***

The sheer impossibility of a creature that size somehow fitting in the Staff Room, let alone the washroom from which it emerged, was such a surprise that most of those present couldn't help but look at the monster in amazement. And it is the nature of a basilisk that to look at one for any length of time is to be *defeated* by it. Most of the faculty and students were petrified before they could even draw wands. Blaise turned around instinctively at the first sign of trouble and was turned into a statue that now blocked the door against anyone else trying to escape. Theo Nott's fingers were almost in place to twist his Notice-Me-Not ring when they were stilled. Marcus Flint and Emily Rossum (to the surprise of both) were locked in a half-embrace when the Basilisk's eyes found them. Lily Potter placed herself between the monster and those children who were not yet petrified and tried to protect them all with a Protego, forgetting in her haste that the Protego shield is transparent and no defense against a basilisk's gaze. She and the three prefects who stood near her were the next to be transfixed. Flitwick unleashed a deadly flock of ravens armed with razor-like talons that would have flayed any lesser creature alive, but they all dropped to the ground like stones before they could inflict any damage. The diminutive professor followed his summoned birds into petrification barely a second later.

Certain that he was about to die, Severus Snape tried to take the monster with him. He kept his eyes off the Basilisk for as long as possible before unleashing his most dangerous spell in its general direction. **"SECTUMSEMPRA!"** Instantly, whirling blades of pure magical force lashed out at the basilisk, causing huge bloody gashes to appear all over its body. Snape had a moment of satisfaction. Then, to his shock, the wounds from the most damaging spell he knew short of the Killing Curse simply faded from view. "*Regeneration,*" he thought in

amazement. "*Like a troll!*" And then, he thought nothing else.

The last adult in the room focused her attention not on fighting the monster but on protecting the few children not yet petrified. McGonagall lashed out with her wand, and a large sofa flipped itself up and over before melting into the shape of a protective opaque dome that landed on top of Neville and Hermione. However, this attracted the monster's attention towards her. She jumped, and her form suddenly flowed like mercury, but it was a brown tabby cat with spectacle-like markings around its eyes that landed on the floor and fell over, petrified.

And then there were two, both stuck for the moment underneath McGonagall's improvised barrier: Hermione Granger, who immediately set herself to the task of transfiguring a hole in the floor through which they might escape, and Neville Longbottom, who clutched his wand in a death grip as he desperately tried to remember the smell of sea salt in the air and the feel of ice-cold waves crashing over him.

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### ***The Library*** ***3:10 p.m.***

"Merlin's bones!" exclaimed Ginny, earning herself a loud "SHHH!" from Madam Pince. "So that's what petrified Professor Dumbledore and the others?" she whispered more softly.

"I think so," said Harry. "But now that we know what it is, we can stop it. We just need to get this information to ..."

Harry was suddenly interrupted by the sudden arrival of a *very large bear*, which was a decidedly unexpected

development in a library, as denoted by the number of people who screamed at the sight of it. It appeared to be a medium-sized brown bear or perhaps a small grizzly save for its glowing silvery appearance. Harry's surprise was only compounded when the beast spoke in the terrified voice of Neville Longbottom.

"HARRY! SEND HELP! ME AND HERMIONE ARE IN THE STAFF ROOM WITH A BASILISK! EVERY BODY ELSE IS ALREADY... *OH NO* - "

Instantly, Neville's bear Patronus (and how perfectly "Neville" it was for the boy to pick this moment to both master the corporeal Patronus *and* use it to send Harry a warning message) winked out of existence. Harry had a single instant of terrified paralysis. Then, in a flash, he gathered up all his papers and ran out of the Library, with Ginny, Amy, and the furious complaints of Irma Pince all following behind him.

---

### ***Outside the Staff Room***

#### ***3:13 p.m.***

The Heir of Slytherin waited patiently until the last of the screams and spell-fire stopped. Then, he hissed softly and commanded the Basilisk to return to the Chamber of Secrets where it slumbered when its master had no work for it. The Heir was still hidden beneath the Potter Invisibility Cloak, as he currently still wore the shape of Percy Weasley and would continue to do so for some time yet. Such a pity that Lockhart's team had never found a way to end the effects of Polyjuice Potion prematurely. Not that it would matter, really. He was nearly done with this body whatever its shape. Within a few hours, he'd have a *new* body, one he would not need to share with anyone

else, and then the need for even the tiniest concession to subtlety would finally come to an end.

The Heir flicked Ron Weasley's wand towards the door to the Staff Room which quietly swung open. He poked his head in and turned around. As expected, there was no one left in the room, whether teacher or student, who wasn't paralyzed by the Basilisk's gaze. Paralyzed until someone showed up with enough of the priceless Restoration Potion for dozens of people people. Not that he'd be giving them that much time anyway before he returned to finish what he'd started, permanently this time. The Heir grinned triumphantly.

"Checkmate."

# Revelations in a Disused Lavatory

## CHAPTER 42: Revelations in a Disused Lavatory

### *The Staff Room*

***3:15 p.m.***

Harry slid to a stop near the door to the Staff Room so suddenly that Amy and Ginny nearly fell into him. Without even looking, he held up an arm to silence them. Then, after a moment's thought, he turned and whispered to the girls.

*"Do either of you have a mirror on you?"*

Ginny gave him a "*Duh! Of course!*" look and then fished a compact mirror out of her robe. He took it and dropped to one knee before slowly edging the mirror in front of the open door less than a foot above the floor. He wasn't sure whether seeing the reflection of Slytherin's Basilisk was safe or not, but he assumed it would be safer to see the reflection of its trunk rather than the eyes. It was a moot point, though, as there was no sign of the Basilisk – just a score of petrified wizards and witches, professors and students alike. Marcus and Emily in their half embrace. A petrified cat laying on its side. Neville crouched defensively in front of Hermione who was kneeling next to the six-inch wide hole she'd transfigured in the floor. Harry shook his head ruefully. Another twenty seconds or so, and she'd have made it! Harry and the girls entered the room silently, edging carefully around the petrified form of Blaise Zabini which nearly barred the entryway. On the far side of the room, Harry's mother was standing petrified with her wand outstretched while unsuccessfully shielding several students with her body. Harry closed his eyes and took a moment to lock down his emotions. Nearly every friend he



had in the world was petrified in this room, along with the more likeable of his two parents, but he couldn't do any of them any good if he broke down now and cried or lost himself to a screaming rage.

"What in Merlin's name...?" exclaimed Fred Weasley from the doorway as he took in the frozen tableau in shock. Seconds later, other students appeared in the hallway behind him. Some gasped while a few others outright screamed upon realizing that the entire faculty was petrified, along with a number of students. Still others ran off to share the awful news with the rest of the school. Harry's eyes lighted on Theo Nott who stood frozen in the corner. He leaned over to Ginny and Amy.

"I need a distraction," he whispered. Without giving any sign that she'd even heard him, Ginny darted over to Fred, flung herself into his arms, and began to cry.

"Oh, Fred! It's awful! And to think if you'd gotten here a few minutes earlier, you'd have been petrified too!" As she wept, she maneuvered Fred around so that his back was to Harry and the view of the students out in the hallway was obstructed. Amy stepped out to talk to those students, providing a further misdirection. As they did, Harry moved over to Theo and, after taking a quick glance around, slid the Notice-Me-Not ring off the boy's finger and onto his own hand.

*"I'll get this back to you as soon as I can, buddy,"* he whispered sadly as he brushed the other boy's bangs out of his frozen eyes. *"But I suspect I might need it before this mess is over – for all our sake."* Then, he looked around once room before deciding on a course of action. He strode over to the faculty fireplace and picked up a scoop of Floo powder.

"Potter, what's going on here?!" barked an angry voice from behind him. It was Miranda Bonnavie, with a couple of other Slytherins behind her.

"Oh, good," said Harry sarcastically. "Someone in a position of authority has arrived, even if it's not somebody useful." Without further acknowledgment of the obnoxious Pureblood, he threw the Floo powder into the fireplace and called out. "DMLE! James Potter!"

Seconds later, his father's face appeared in the green flames. "Harry?! What's going on? Wait – is that the Staff Room?"

"Dad, listen! The whole faculty's been petrified, along with all the Seventh Year Prefects and ... well, several of my friends. Can you send some aurors to the school?"

"*All* of the faculty has been petrified?!" James exclaimed, dumbfounded. Then his eyes widened even further. "Your mother...?" he continued in a shaky voice.

Harry nodded. "I'm afraid so. I don't see Mr. Hagrid, Mr. Filch, or Madam Pomfrey here, but every other faculty member is here and petrified. Dad, I know what's causing this. Back in the earliest days of the school, Salazar Slytherin made a basilisk."

James was nonplussed by that statement. "A basilisk? Harry, basilisks kill. They don't petrify."

"Dad, *trust me*. This one *petrifies*. It was specially engineered by Slytherin as an anti-siege weapon that could only be controlled with Parseltongue."

James looked even more distressed at that, as if he was wondering if the bad news would ever stop. "Parseltongue?"

Is ... is Jim among the petrified students?"

"No. No one's seen Jim all day. Can you send help?"

The man shook his head. "No, son. As bad as things are, no one's been..." he paused and swallowed. "No one's ... *died* yet, and until somebody does, the aurors can't enter the school without the Headmaster opening it for us."

Harry nodded. "And we don't have a Headmaster right now. Or even a Deputy Headmaster. Can the students evacuate on their own?"

James shook his head grimly. "We're ... not sure how the wards would handle that. We suspect that if a large enough percentage of the student body left at once, it would trigger the school's closure procedures. So you'd have to evacuate everyone at once and transport all the petrified people with you or they'd be stuck there for years and no one would be able to go in and get them. And of course, it's possible that an evacuation while the Headmaster was incapacitated might have some other negative effects. I've got some warding specialists looking into it right now." He rubbed his chin. "How can a basilisk even get around the school without being seen?" he asked.

"It can transport itself through any part of the school's plumbing system. It's magic, but beyond that, I don't know."

"How did you figure all this out, Harry?"

The boy held up the pages he'd copied from the ancient history book while preparing an evasive answer that would leave out his conversation with Lockhart.

"The Headmaster and everyone else had always assumed that whatever was causing the petrifications was something

new, either a spell or a dark object, that was brought in for the first time back in 1943. But with the way it could get around the castle so easily and the legends of Slytherin's Monster, I thought that it might be something old instead but which had simply been rediscovered. Something so old that it had been left out of more recent history books. I got access to a first edition copy of **Hogwarts: A History** in the Restricted Section and there it was right in the Table of Contents – Slytherin's Basilisk."

"That's brilliant, Harry!. Anything there on how to kill it? Or at least put it back to sleep?"

Harry hesitated. "Well, that depends. Do you have any idea on where to find either the Sword of Gryffindor or the Diadem of Ravenclaw? The book says that they're both useful against it."

James snorted. "Might as well ask for Excalibur and the Holy Grail."

"Well, except for those two built-in weaknesses, we're basically talking about a basilisk with troll regeneration and magic resistant dragon scales, among other defenses."

"*Merlin*," James whispered in horror before getting hold of himself. "Are there any prefects left?"

Harry turned and looked back. Bonneville had been joined by Titus Mitchell of Slytherin and Bobby Lattimer of Hufflepuff.

"Hey, Lattimer! Mitchell! My dad wants to talk to you!"

"Us?" Bobby said with a gulp. "Why?"

"You're prefects and you're not Bonnevie," he said. Miranda glared back at him coldly.

Nervously, Lattimer and Mitchell approached and received orders from the Senior Auror. All students were to be gathered in the Great Hall because there was no plumbing that led directly there. Students would be grouped by House with a headcount performed immediately thereafter. The prefects would then bar and ward the doors, and the students would wait there until they got the all-clear, which would be delivered by James Potter's Patronus. As soon as the ward experts said it was okay, they would then oversee an orderly evacuation to Hogsmeade.

"Oh," James finally said with a certain amount of hesitation. "If you can do so without endangering yourself or anyone else, please find my son Jim."

Both prefects nodded earnestly. Then, the fire went out. Immediately, they (with the grumbling assistance of Miranda Bonnevie) led the other students away from the Staff Room to the Great Hall. Unfortunately, they were met along the way by a number of upset Gryffindors led by a bruised and angry Percy Weasley.

"Where's Potter!?" the eldest Weasley asked furiously.

"Um, present?" said Harry.

"Not you, Harry. Your lunatic brother. He attacked me, tied me up, and locked me in my study room!"

"What?" said Fred. "When? You came to see us in the infirmary not half an hour ago! You were the one who told us to go to the faculty staff meeting where everyone got petrified! Harry and I were late and that's the only reason we didn't get stiffed like everybody else!"

"It wasn't Percy, Fred," said Oliver Wood. "I heard him ten minutes ago banging on the door to his study with his feet while he was still tied up on the floor. It took me until just now to break down the ward keeping his door locked."

"The Polyjuice Potion that was stolen!" exclaimed Susan Bones. "Jim must have stolen some of your hair to disguise himself as you after knocking you out!"

"Or, speaking purely hypothetically," said Harry in a calm voice, "somebody else Polyjuiced to look like Jim attacked Percy before copying *his* form as well. Lockhart did get out of here with gallons of the stuff, after all."

"Merlin, why do you Slytherins have to make everything so complicated?" said Fred irritably.

"Besides," said Titus Mitchell. "You said that the monster that's petrifying everyone is some kind of basilisk, right? Well, Potter's the only Parselmouth in the school. Who else could control it?"

Harry frowned but didn't respond, while many other students began muttering in frightened tones at the mention of a basilisk. Angrily, Percy shook his head.

"WHOEVER IT WAS...!" the Gryffindor paused, closed his eyes, and collected himself before proceeding more calmly. "Whoever it was, he indicated that he's done something with Ron. Has anyone seen him today?" There was a soft murmuring from the assembled students that was broken by an anguished cry.

"The Heir of Slytherin has him!" It was Seamus Finnegan running down the stairs looking completely distraught. Dean was just behind him. "We've just come from our room. Ron's stuff has been messed up like there's been a struggle,

and ... and there's another message on the wall." Seamus hesitated at the sight of Percy. He swallowed. "It said '*Weasley's Skeleton Will Lie In The Chamber Forever.*'"

The crowd went deathly quiet at that. Fred and Ginny both went ashen, while Percy's face crumpled for a second before being overtaken by a righteous fury.

"Right!" he said. "Anyone who's ready to put an end to this rubbish, get your wands out and follow me! We'll break up into groups of five and search this castle from top to bottom!"

"Percy!" said Bobby Lattimer. "I've already spoken with James Potter at the DMLE. He wants the students to barricade ourselves in the Great Hall until it's safe to come out."

"I'm not hiding out where it's *SAFE* when my little brother is missing!" Percy snarled.

"For once, I agree with the Gryffindors," said Titus Mitchell. "This so-called 'Heir of Slytherin' doesn't care who he hurts. He's hit Professors Snape and Sinestra, both our Seventh Year prefects, and several other Slytherin students." Mitchell turned towards Percy. "*Everyone* at Hogwarts has a mutual enemy, it seems." Percy returned Titus's gaze and then nodded, while dozens of members of all four Houses registered their approval.

Bobby Lattimer bit his lip in frustration and then shook his head. "Weasley, if you insist on this ... *Gryffindoring* then on your own head be it. But I *insist* that the younger students stay here. Everyone Third Year or below will get in the Great Hall *now*. Weasley, as you and your ... posse, I suppose, make your way through the castle, direct any

students you encounter down here." He hesitated. "Good luck," he finally said with sincerity.

Ginny leaned in to Harry. "I think that's our cue to leave, don't you think?" She reached out and grasped Harry's robe, while on the other side, Amy did the same.

"Yeah, Harry. Be a dear and twist that ring on the count of three." Startled, Harry was surprised when Wilkes started counting. Belatedly, he gasped in as much air as he could and twisted Theo's ring. Ten seconds later, the three of them were several corridors away, gasping.

"How did you know what the ring did?" Harry asked Ginny suspiciously.

"Amy told me," she said simply. He turned to the other girl who simply shrugged.

"Uncle Gregory has one just like it. I think it was standard issue for the wealthier Death Eaters."

At that, Harry glanced down at Theo's ring with sudden distaste, as if checking to see if it had bloodstains on it. He'd assumed all this time that it was just a Nott family heirloom.

"So, what's the plan?" asked Ginny.

"Plan?" he replied almost irritably. "Why would you assume I have a plan? You just grabbed me and bullied me into using the ring I'd stolen off of a petrified friend to escape unnoticed before we could get herded into the only safe place in this whole wretched school."

"Safety is kind of a relative term around here, as you know good and well. And I'm pretty sure you always have a plan."



Harry grimaced and looked back and forth between the two girls, one of whom he'd sworn to protect from harm, and yet here she was ... *Gryffindoring* as Bobby Lattimer had so eloquently put it. He sighed in frustration and pulled out the pages from **Hogwarts: A History** to review once again.

"According to this, there's an artifact called the Ewer of Hufflepuff that can cure the petrifications, but if it still exists, it's in the Chamber of Secrets and no one knows where that is. As much as it pains me to say this, we need my brother. It's obvious that the Heir has gone to great lengths to frame him for some reason. Maybe it's because his Parseltongue really can be used to gain control of the Basilisk. In theory, any Parselmouth can command it, but there's a weakness built into it that allows anyone who possesses the Diadem of Ravenclaw to overcome the control of any ordinary Parselmouth. If the Heir *doesn't* have the Diadem, we may have a chance."

*"And frankly, Little Brother," Harry thought to himself. "I'd rather you be the one to publicly use Parseltongue on the Basilisk rather than having to blow my own cover."*

"And if the Heir *does* have this Diadem thingy?" asked Amy.

"Oh, well in that case, we're screwed. Totally and utterly." Harry looked around. "Come on. Let's find my idiot brother."

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### ***Meanwhile in Gryffindor Tower ...***

It had taken Jim almost half an hour to wriggle free from his bonds and another five to shoulder his way through the broom closet door. He was angry but above all frightened, both for Ron and for the rest of the school. Whoever Tom Riddle was and however he was acting through the Diary,

he was now in control of Ron, and the fact that he felt the need to lock Jim up was a sign that he had something big planned. Jim had been locked in a seventh floor closet and had to run all the way down, grateful that he'd kept up his exercise.

It wasn't until he got down to the third floor that he saw his first sign of life. Unfortunately, it was one of his least favorite Gryffindors - Cormac McLaggen. Even more unfortunately, the obnoxious jackass had his wand out and immediately pointed it at him.

"Stop right there, *Potter!* Don't even try to reach for your wand!"

"I don't *have* a wand, McLaggen! It was stolen by the same person who locked me in a closet for the last six hours!"

"Don't try to lie to me, Potter. Everyone's on to you. Everyone knows you blew up the Mandrake crop and then beat up Percy Weasley and stole his hair!"

"I ... Mandrake ... hair?! *What are you talking about?!*"

"Save it, Potter!" Cormac laughed. "Heh. They'll probably give me a Special Services plaque for capturing you! **STUPIFY!**"

Instantly, Jim dropped to one knee and rolled out of the way of the spell. His roll carried him next to a small side table with a flower vase on it. He lashed out with an open palm and flung the vase towards the startled McLaggen who threw up his arms reflexively to bat it away. Immediately, Jim was running towards him. When he was a few feet away, he jumped up and kicked McLaggen's wand out of his hand. Then, as he landed, he grabbed the boy by the shoulders, fell backwards, and through Cormac over him and headfirst

into the stone wall. The boy dropped to the ground, stunned. Jim froze for a second, still breathing hard. He'd been studying Taekwando for years, though only recently with true dedication, and this was the very real first fight he'd been in. The adrenaline rush almost made him dizzy. He examined McLaggen to make sure he was alright and then picked up the other boy's wand. A single lonely spark popped out and fizzled.

"Figures," he said dejectedly. He dropped the wand and then continued on down the stairs, this time more cautiously. Obviously, someone (probably Possessed Ron) had been busy for the last several hours and had somehow managed to frame him for a number of crimes. And the Mandrakes were destroyed?! How would they ever revive Dumbledore now? As he drew near the Common Room, he heard voices up ahead. He definitely could pick out Percy's uncharacteristically loud voice as he (even more uncharacteristically) threatened to do something anatomically dangerous with Jim's wand once he found the boy. Jim took a deep breath and then ran. Immediately, several of his House-mates yelled out and fired off curses at him. He dodged two, and then shoulder-blocked Seamus, knocking him to the ground. Jim continued running straight towards an overstuffed chair that stood between him and the exit, ducking and dodging spellfire as he did. Then, he jumped onto the back of the chair, knocking it over and letting his momentum carry him forward into a roll straight out the door.

Once outside, he took off down the nearest side corridor as fast as he could while trying to take an indirect path towards his destination. Jim had spent a lot of time thinking about what he'd learned from Tom Riddle's false memories while he struggled to get free. And now, he thought he knew where the answers lay.

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Unfortunately, getting there required Jim to run a gauntlet through the school, and in a Third Floor corridor, his luck finally ran out. He was almost to a T-junction when his pursuers, a quintet of male upperclassmen, caught up to him, and one of them nailed him from behind with an Incarcerous. It was Angus McLaggen (Cormac's second cousin) from Gryffindor who'd taken him down. The others included Bole and Derrick from Slytherin and two other Fifth Years, one each from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Cursing, Jim hit the ground painfully as ropes appeared to wrap around him.

"Ha! Good one, McLaggen!" said Bole. "Time to make this bastard pay for what he's done!" The others laughed in agreement and then stopped ... as Harry Potter stepped confidently around the corridor and moved in front of his prone brother.

"That's quite enough," he said calmly. Behind him, Ginny and Amy peaked around the corner nervously.

"Oh look," sneered Peregrine Derrick. "It's the *other* one!" He fired off another Incarcerous spell which Harry casually batted off to one side with a lazy swipe of his wand. Harry fought back the urge to mock the boy – Derrick's form was quite poor, and after months working with Team Counterstrike, parrying the older boy's attack was like going from ping pong to children's badminton.

The older boys looked at one another nervously, now reminded of Harry's dueling skills. Then, Bole yelled out. "All at once, then! He can't parry *all* of us!"

Harry raised his chin defiantly, even though he himself was not optimistic about parrying five spells at once. The five

boys cast simultaneously. Harry blinked ... and dilated. Everything went to a crawl as he felt his eerily slow heartbeat within his chest. **Thump ... Thump.** He carefully studied the wand movements of his attackers, and after a few subjective seconds, he'd identified their spells: two stunners, one Jelly-Legs Jinx, one Incontinence Jinx (from McLaggen, the wanker!), and surprisingly, one Lacero that could cause some serious damage. Even more surprisingly, it came from a Hufflepuff who Harry didn't know but who obviously had an unusually mean streak for a Badger.

**Thump ... Thump.** Harry next examined the surroundings, and his attention was drawn to the large tapestry hanging on the wall next to his attackers. He also figured out the expected flight paths of the incoming spells while he planned out his defensive moves. **Thump ... Thump.** He took a third heartbeat just to confirm the paths the spells would travel before releasing his dilation. Instantly, time snapped back to its normal rate, and Harry was a blur of motion. He parried the first two spells and then jumped to the right. He let the Incontinence Jinx fly past him before parrying the Cutting Curse with a powerful forehand even though it was in no danger of hitting him. He also gave the parry a bit of spin that sent the Cutting Curse up and over so that it sliced through the ties holding the tapestry to the wall, causing it to drop. Then, he parried the last hex in such a way that the parry also formed the first move of the Levitation Charm. **"WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!"** In response to his wand movements, the tapestry fell down and over all five boys. Finally, Harry fired off an Incarcerous of his own that wrapped around the boys from outside the tapestry, tying them up together within a heavy woven cocoon.

The fight was over as quickly as it began, and now that it was done, Harry Potter was suddenly amazed to realize that

he'd taken down five older students singlehandedly in less than three seconds. He looked down at his wand in wonder, while behind him, Ginny and Amy just stared slackjawed. Jim was equally astonished.

"What ... you ... what ... HOW?!" Jim's babbling cut through Harry's mild fugue, and as he turned to face his brother, Harry's face assumed a mask of serene self-confidence, as if he'd never thought for one second that fighting 5-on-1 might be a problem.

"Articulate and well-spoken as ever, Little Brother," he said drily before casting a Finite on the ropes and helping Jim to his feet. Jim grumbled at Harry's sarcasm, but he didn't turn down the proffered hand.

"As ... undeniably cool as that was, we need to keep moving. I know how to find the Chamber of Secrets! Come on!" With that, and without even looking to see if Harry was following, Jim ran off down the corridor. Harry rolled his eyes.

"*Gryffindors*," he thought as he followed Jim around the corridor, with Amy and Ginny close behind. Then, just a few seconds later, Harry poked his head back around the corner and pointed his wand at the mass of upperclassmen still struggling and yelling out muffled expletives from inside the tapestry. Five quick Incontinence Jinxes later, the sound of muffled profanity grew even louder as Harry ran off snickering.

"*Sauce for the goose, McLaggen*," he thought mischievously to himself.

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Unfortunately, the brief duel was also a noisy one that attracted quite a bit of attention. Within seconds, the four children were being harried by a dozen or more students in

hot pursuit. A few were firing hexes which were easily dodged but most just yelled for the Potters to stop and surrender. Undaunted, Jim led the others down a flight of stairs and straight through the door of the second floor girls' lavatory.

"I don't have a wand!" Jim yelled while trying to bar the door shut with his body. "Anybody know a locking charm?!"

Harry narrowed his eyes in annoyance. Had Jim actually led them into a dead end before considering whether there was any way to lock the door behind them? Harry whipped out his wand. "**COLLOPORTUS TRIMENDIUM.**" The door flashed brightly and locked itself thoroughly.

"Right. It took a squad of aurors several minutes to break through that ward, so I'd be surprised if the average Hogwarts student could do it any time soon. Now, would you kindly explain what in Merlin's name we're doing *in a girls' toilet!*"

Relaxing finally, Jim took a deep breath and then explained his thinking to the others.

"Okay, pay attention. It turns out that these petrifications have happened before, back in 1943. Only that time, a girl actually died! And what's more, her *ghost* is haunting this very toilet!"

Harry stared at Jim in consternation. "Really," he finally said in a deadpan voice.

"It's true! They call her Moaning Myrtle, and she can probably tell us everything we need to know about the Chamber of Secrets!"

Harry stared at Jim in a mounting fury that his Occlumency did nothing to curtail. Right now, he wished that *his* gaze had petrifying properties. "You ... *git!*" he finally spat.

"What?" Jim replied as if offended.

"I KNEW ABOUT MOANING MYRTLE OVER *SIX MONTHS AGO!*" Harry bellowed at his brother. "SHE REMEMBERS '*BIG YELLOW EYES*' AND NOTHING ELSE!"

Ginny put her hand on his arm. "Harry, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down! All the teachers are petrified! The aurors can't get in to help us! The Mad Petrifier, whoever it is, is running amok! There's a mob of angry students after us! *And I'm trapped in a disused lavatory because Jim has only just now learned a clue that I knew back in November!*"

"All the teachers?" Jim said in a quiet voice. "Including ... Mum?" Harry nodded, calming down a bit at the devastated look on his brother's face. He rubbed his eyes in frustration and stalked off to the opposite corner of the room. Ginny tried to assess the situation.

"Okay, so Myrtle is a dead end. Do you at least have any idea where Ron is? No one's seen him all day. Is he alright?"

Jim barked out a laugh. "Alright? Oh Ron's doing *great!* He's *the bad guy!*"

Harry's head jerked around. "What?!" he exclaimed while an angry Ginny stepped up and poked her finger into Jim's chest menacingly.

"You take that back!" she shouted while Jim put his hands up as if surrendering.



"Take it easy, Ginny. It wasn't Ron's fault. It was the Diary!"

At that, Harry and Amy moved back over to the arguing duo. "What diary?" Amy asked.

Jim looked back and forth among the three Slytherins. "All year long, Ron's been taking class notes in a black leather-bound diary. And I found out just this morning that it's a cursed dark object that somebody must have slipped him. It can affect minds and even possess people outright. And it's haunted – or something like haunted, anyway – by the spirit of the guy who framed Hagrid for being the Heir of Slytherin in 1943. A guy named Tom Riddle!"

"Tom Riddle!" both Harry and Ginny exclaimed simultaneously before looking at each other in confusion.

"Oh," Jim said sarcastically. "Heard of him, have you? What, is he on Slytherin's '*Top Dark Wizards of the 20th Century*' list or something?"

Harry opened his mouth and then clamped it shut quickly. Depending on how one looked at it, the list of Princes mounted on the Lair's wall could be construed as that very thing. He started over.

"Tom Riddle was the Fifth Year Slytherin prefect at the time of the original Heir of Slytherin affair. He later became Head Boy. Dumbledore apparently remembers him fondly. And he's been my Number One suspect for months now. My theory was that Lockhart was actually Tom Riddle teaching here under a fake name for some nefarious purpose, but if he can actually possess a student through a dark object..."

Harry trailed off as he considered the implications. "Which leads me to my next question: How do *you* know about Tom Riddle?" he said turning towards Ginny. The girl simply

looked back and forth between the Potter brothers with a stricken look on her face.

"*This is all my fault,*" she said in a horrified whisper.

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***About nine months ago***  
***The Weasley Burrow***

"Dammit!" Ron exclaimed before stepping out of his room. Ginny heard him and called out.

"What's wrong, Ron?"

"After Dad punched Mr. Malfoy in the face, I got so excited that I totally forgot to ask Mum to buy some loose parchment. I've got enough for assignments, but I don't have anything to take notes with. Do you have any extra?"

"No way!" Ginny exclaimed. "I'm just starting at Hogwarts, and I'm not getting into trouble for being unprepared because I had to give *you* school supplies that you forgot to buy yourself."

"Aw come on, Ginny! Help your brother out!"

She sighed in mock exasperation. Then, she went over to the cauldron containing all her books and removed a thin black leather book which she handed to Ron. "Here. You can use this for notes."

He turned it over and read the cover. "*Tom Marvolo Riddle*. Who's he?"

Ginny shrugged. "It was in my cauldron with my other books when we got home. I told Mum last month that I needed a new diary. I guess she forgot that Harry got me

one as a gift when he was staying with us, and she bought me a new one. Well, by '*new*,' I mean an old one she fished out of the used book bin. There's not even a price tag on it. Anyway, you can have it. I don't think I'd like writing my personal thoughts down in somebody else's diary. Feels kinda creepy."

Ron flipped through the empty book. "Thanks, sis. You're the best."

She laughed. "Glad to see you mature enough to admit it, Ron."

He laughed as well before returning to his own room and setting down at his small writing desk with his new notebook. Taking out a quill and some ink, he quickly wrote on the inside cover. "*Property of Ron Weasley*." Then, to his surprise, the ink slowly faded away. For a second, he wondered if the Twins had replaced his inkwell with disappearing ink again. Then, new words appeared on the first page of the diary.

"Hello, Ron. My name is Tom."

Ron eyes widened in surprise. Immediately, he thought back to discussions he'd had with his father before he first went off to Hogwarts, specifically about how recognize dark objects. "*Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't tell where it keeps its brain*," was one of Arthur Weasley's more amusing recommendations that Ron had never anticipated needing to recall. Then, Ron heard a very soft hiss, and suddenly, all of his father's words of advice were completely forgotten, and other ideas popped into his head in their place.

\*\*\* *Be calm. You are not afraid but curious.* \*\*\*

*\*\*\*You want to know more about me before you tell your parents. \*\*\**

*\*\*\* They'll be especially proud of you if you know all about the book before you speak to them.\*\*\**

Ron touched his quill to the paper and wrote a response.

"Who are you, Tom?"

As the ink faded away, more information passed from Ron to the Diary. He was an earnest but insecure child with vague dreams of earning his parents' respect by becoming Head Boy someday, even though he had no idea how to achieve such a goal with his lackluster academic skills. And also, something about a "Boy-Who-Lived" who Ron had promised to aid in defeating a dark wizard known as ... Voldemort. The Diary silently assessed its understanding of Ron's psyche. Emotional stratagems that had been devised to use against the girl who had held the Diary previously were discarded and new approaches for manipulation were devised.

"I am not actually a person, Ron. I am TOM - Thaumaturgical Organizing Matrix. My creator, Tom Marvolo Riddle, enchanted me long ago to serve as a study aid. With my assistance, Tom Riddle eventually became Head Boy before he graduated."

Ron's eyes widened. "Head Boy?! How?!"

"If you write all your notes within my pages, I can organize them for you and allow you to restructure the information however you wish. If you write a first draft of a paper or essay within me, I can edit it for you for both grammar and content. As exams approach, I can quiz you on topics that your teachers have discussed most frequently. There are

many other things I can do to help you to become a better student and a better wizard."

Ron smiled eagerly ... and in doing so was lost.

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***Now ...***

"It's okay, Ginny," said Harry. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't write in the book and couldn't have known what it was."

"Yeah," said Jim. "I mean, I've had Occlumency training and it almost affected *me*." Harry gave his brother a look, and Jim responded testily. "Of course, Harry here would have been *completely unaffected* since he's '*Master of the Mental Arts*' or whatever. But my point is, neither you nor Ron is at fault here. Ron's the victim and you're not responsible for what happened to him."

Then, Jim glanced over at Amy with a thoughtful expression. "In fact, the diary was what caused Ron to turn against me after he found out I was a Parselmouth. I wonder if Ron somehow manipulated those other Gryffindors into jumping me before Christmas."

Amy suddenly looked a bit queasy, and Harry noticed. "What?" he demanded. Amy looked over at Ginny.

"Might as well tell him," Ginny said. "We're trapped in a bathroom. This is no time for secrets, I guess."

Amy turned back to Jim and swallowed hard. "It, um, wasn't Gryffindors who jumped you that night. It was Derrick and Bole pretending to be Gryffindors. It was part of Cassius Warrington's plan to ... well, I'm still not sure what his plan was beyond getting you to like Slytherins and maybe

eventually becoming a dark wizard or something. It was kind of vague on his part." She hesitated. "He's not very bright."

"I can vouch for that," said Harry. Jim, meanwhile, was confused and, strangely, hurt.

"And you were in on it? Letting them attack me and then pretending to come to my aid?! I've been walking around afraid of my own House ever since that night!"

"Oh, leave her alone, Jim," said Ginny. "It was my idea."

Jim sputtered angrily at that, while Harry smiled at the girl. "Why Miss Weasley!" he said. "Have you been scheming something? I'm impressed."

"Thanks," she said sarcastically. "Jim, I may have had a bit of a crush on you when I was just a little girl, but family is family. I was convinced from the start that Warrington was really the one behind the prank that got Fred expelled. I talked it over with Amy and she agreed to go undercover with Warrington's clique to get proof."

"I thought Lockhart confessed to that prank," said Jim.

"I still don't understand what Lockhart was up to," said Amy, "but Warrington and Miranda Bonnevie admitted to me that Warrington was really the one responsible. They made me promise not to share it with Derrick and Bole, since they were both victims of the prank, but they didn't make me swear not to reveal it to anyone else, so ... here we are."

"Wait," said Harry suddenly. "Miranda Bonnevie was part of a conspiracy to *physically assault the Boy-Who-Lived*?! That's ... delicious!"

"Anyway," said Ginny after shooting Harry a dirty look, "that's not the important bit. Tell them about 'the friend,' Amy."

Amy nodded. "The members of Warrington's clique include him, Bonnevie, Bole, Derrick ... and Warrington's *secret accomplice*." Then, she nodded, as if that answered everything.

Harry frowned. "And? Sorry, but it's not really a shocking revelation to say that Warrington has another accomplice but you don't have any idea who it is."

"You don't understand, Harry," said Amy. "I don't mean Warrington has a secret accomplice and I don't know who it is. I mean Warrington has a secret accomplice and *he* doesn't know who it is. Just some mysterious 'friend' who leaves him letters in envelopes with advice on how to perform pranks against his enemies. Letters that just sort of appear out of nowhere when he's not looking. Letters that the friend can even deliver to his dorm room in the middle of the night, and he's *certain* it's not a roommate."

Harry inhaled sharply. "The cloak," he said softly.

"What?" said Jim. "What about the cloak?" Harry waved off his questions and closed his eyes to think. When his thoughts wouldn't move fast enough, he dilated and contemplated the facts so deeply that he almost forgot himself and dilated too long. On the sixth heartbeat, he let go and opened his eyes in shock.

"It's *all* connected!"

"What is?" asked Ginny.

"Everything! Ron's been behind nearly everything that's happened this year. Well, I mean, probably not the stuff involving crazy killer house elves, but who knows, maybe that too in some roundabout way." Harry turned towards Jim.

"Someone plays a prank on you involving that Leprechaun crown and leads you to think it was me, right?" Jim nodded. "So you try to plant dungbombs in the Slytherin dorm. Did Ron help you with that?"

Jim's eyes widened. "Yeah, he got them for me from the Twins."

"But then, no one in Slytherin retaliated, so Ron must have played the hair-changing prank on you both and blamed it on us. That prank was the same one that the Twins tried to play on me last year. Ron could have easily gotten it from them. Then, you retaliate with the boggart prank. Did Ron help with that?"

"It was his idea," Jim said faintly, as the level of Tom Riddle's manipulations finally started to become clear.

"Naturally. Then the next thing to happen was the first petrification." Harry paused thoughtfully. "Only I don't understand why anyone would petrify a cat."

"McGonagall said that Mrs. Norris could detect me even if I was under the cloak," Jim said. "And I remember *telling* Ron that right after McGonagall told me!"

Harry nodded at that. "The cloak that was stolen that very night, right after a guardian animal that can see through it is petrified. And he leaves a note implicating me that causes you to attack me the next morning. *And then*, a week later,



he plays a prank on the Weasley Twins and uses it as cover to steal their map."

"What map?" Jim asked in confusion. Harry waved off the question as unimportant, as he was thinking of other things.

*"That weekend, he must have ordered the snakes not to speak to any Parselmouths in the school. That's what Ka the Cobra meant in the Lair the other day! Tom Riddle as Prince-Emeritus would outrank me since I'm not Prince yet, but the Hydra was divided on whether to recognize a spiritual remnant of Tom who was possessing a child who wasn't even a Slytherin!"*

"So after that point," Harry said aloud, "Ron and Tom Riddle have the cloak and the map and with them the ability to travel almost unimpeded through the school."

"But they searched the whole school for the cloak and didn't find it," said Ginny.

Harry shrugged. "If Ron's really under the control of Tom Riddle, he would know where the Chamber of Secrets is located. He could have hidden the cloak there until the heat died down. He probably left them there until Winter Term started, at which point the petrifications start in earnest."

"But why go after Cormac?" asked Jim. "Just to make me look bad?"

Harry rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "A test run. He petrifies the cat, and no one revives it, but the Headmaster might just not want to spend an expensive potion on a cat. So later, he petrifies a student, and Cormac gets revived after a week. *Then*, he petrifies Colin ... and Colin *stays* petrified. But *maybe* that's just because he's Muggleborn from a poor family and the school won't pay the expense for the

Mandrake potion. So *then*, Riddle petrifies Draco and Justin, both of whom are from extremely wealthy families that would pay anything to cure them. And yet, neither of them gets revived either, thus proving that there's literally no Mandrake potion to be had."

Ginny's eyes widened as she finally figured it out as well. "And once Riddle *knows* that there's no extra potions to be had, he goes after Professor Dumbledore."

Harry nodded. "Followed soon after by the rest of the staff, but only after he destroys the Mandrakes growing in Greenhouse #3 to delay revival even further. He takes out the whole faculty and the student leadership, plus he takes out most of *my* close friends and *would* have taken out me if I'd shown up at the meeting on time. Everyone would have assumed that you were responsible for the petrifications due to sibling rivalry."

"So what was his plan, beyond screwing with me all year?" Jim asked.

"Wheels within wheels," Harry said grimly. "Riddle has a multi-layered strategy with lots of possible goals to shoot for. And he adapts quickly to changing circumstances. But yeah, it's obvious that two of his major goals are wrecking your reputation and taking Dumbledore off the board for months ... or longer. I talked to James earlier. He has ward specialists trying to figure out how to evacuate the school safely, but he was worried that if a sufficiently large number of students panic and flee the school all at once, it might cause Hogwarts itself to trigger the school closure process. And if Dumbledore or any of the other petrification victims are still here when that happens, they could remain petrified for *years* just because no one will be able to get to them and wake them up!"

The other students were horrified. "We've got to do something!" Ginny said.

"Like what? We're stuck in a toilet, remember?" Harry replied in irritation.

Amy spoke up. "Yeah, Moaning Myrtle's toilet. And when you talked to her, you're sure she didn't say anything other than '*big yellow eyes*'?"

Harry shrugged. "That's what Hermione and Padma said. They were the ones who interviewed her."

"Oh, well, *that's* your problem!" Amy said. "You sent a Gryffindor and a Ravenclaw to do your work for you!"

"Oi!" said Jim angrily, but Amy ignored him as she walked over to one of the stalls and knocked on it gently.

"Myrtle, honey? Could you come out for a minute? We'd like to talk to you."

After a few seconds, the ghost of a mousy Third Year Ravenclaw with pigtails and horn-rim glasses floated through the stall door. She looked angrily at Jim and Harry.

"Boys aren't supposed to be in here!" she shrieked.

"It's alright, Myrtle," Amy said soothingly. "We just would like to ask you some questions ... about how you ... died, if that's okay."

"I know," the ghost replied peevishly. "I heard you all shouting about it. Well, I've already told the other two. I was in the bathroom when I heard some hissing and then a funny grinding noise. Then, I walked out of the stall ... and died. That's all I remember."

"Well," said Ginny. "Can you tell us what you remember about Tom Riddle?"

She smiled warmly at the mention of Riddle's name. "Tom was wonderful. He was the kindest, smartest, and most handsome boy in the whole school."

"Not to mention *most evil*," Jim grumbled.

"You take that back!" Myrtle shouted. "Tom was my friend!"

"Tom was the one who killed you!" Jim shouted back.

"*That's a LIE!*"

"Myrtle, I'm sorry," said Harry as kindly as he could manage, "but it's true. Tom was the one behind the petrifications that led to your death."

"IT WAS AN ACCIDENT!" A silence lasting several seconds fell over the room in response to Myrtle's angry scream as everybody absorbed what she'd said. Then, suddenly, Harry face-palmed himself and groaned.

"It's like every five minutes, I'm reminded that I'm an idiot!" he exclaimed. "I knew Tom Riddle was behind a scheme to improve the status of Muggleborns by petrifying them and framing Pureblooded Slytherin bigots as being responsible. But it never occurred to me that all of the Muggleborns who got petrified *were in on it!* Did Hagrid know?"

She shook her head. "No. Hagrid was sweet, but we all knew he couldn't keep a secret."

"Myrtle, please," Harry said in his most earnest voice. "Lives are in danger. We need to know what happened to you?"

The ghost sighed despondently. "It was Nobby's idea. He suggested that the Halfbloods might get on our side if it looked like the Slytherins were actually endangering the Muggleborns instead of just treating us so horribly. Then, Tom suggested petrification. He couldn't tell us how he was doing it, but he could leave us petrified for a few weeks and then frame Abraxas Malfoy for being the Heir of Slytherin. And it was working! All the other Houses were treating us better and the Slytherins worse! Until ..." She stopped abruptly.

"Until you fell over after being petrified, hit your head, and died," Harry finished.

She shook her head sadly. "It was my own fault. I was supposed to meet Tom upstairs at nine o'clock to get petrified. But Olive Hornsby had made fun of me, and I wanted to fix my makeup. I didn't want to get petrified for months and look like I'd been crying the whole time, so I came in here first. But then, since I was already in here, I decided to use the facilities. While I was in the stall, I heard this funny grinding sound and then some loud hissing. I stepped out to see who it was and saw Tom ... and I fell."

Harry's eyes flashed with excitement. "Myrtle, this is very important. Did you ever hear Tom enter this room through the door before you heard the grinding and the hissing?" She shook her head no. "Thank you," he said.

"If you do find Tom somehow, tell him... tell him that it wasn't his fault. I made all the others promise never to reveal what we'd been doing. But he never came to see me after that day even though we had ... I mean, he ... *changed* so much after that. I just ..." With that, the ghostly girl burst into tears and then flew back into her toilet, disappearing with a splash.

Harry looked around the room as if searching for something.

"What?" asked Ginny. "You've thought of something."

"Maybe. The assumption was always that the Heir of Slytherin targeted Myrtle while she was here in the girls' lavatory. But it was actually just bad luck that they met up here. She said that she heard a grinding sound. And she also said that Tom just appeared here without coming in through the door. I think the actual physical entrance to the Chamber of Secrets might actually be somewhere here in this very room!"

"Salazar Slytherin put the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in a girls' bathroom?!" Amy asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "Maybe it wasn't a bathroom back then. There was an 800-year-gap between 1943 and the last time before that when the Chamber had been opened. And during that time, the whole country became obsessed with denigrating Slytherin's memory. Maybe they converted his office into a lavatory as some kind of insult without even realizing the entry way to the Chamber was here. Makes as much sense as anything else in this crazy school."

"Perfect!" exclaimed Jim. "So let's find the entrance, go down and get Ron, and deal with Riddle and the Basilisk for good."

Harry stared at Jim and fought down the impulse to bite his brother's head off for such a stupid suggestion. "That's ... one option," he said with strained diplomacy. "Another is we confirm that the entrance is here and then we unseal the door and persuade some Sixth Year prefects to go down there, since the odds of us taking down a dark wizard aided

by an unstoppable petrifying relic of Salazar Slytherin are pretty slim."

"We can't wait! Ron needs our help!" Ginny said urgently

"He needs help from people who can actually *help him*, Ginny," Harry said reasonably before turning back to his brother. "Not jumped up Gryffindors with delusions of grandeur!"

"FINE! Just find the entrance and I'll go by myself if you're too much of a COWARD! "

Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Coward?" he said in a quiet voice. "You're calling me a coward, Jim? Really? Tell me something, Little Brother. Just between the four of us - how old were you *the first time* you talked to a snake?"

Jim paled. "What?"

"I saw your reactions to that snake we accidentally conjured at the dueling club meeting. You were pretty surprised by the snake's appearance, yet strangely not surprised at all by the fact that you could talk to it. And your response in the aftermath was not to deny that you were a Parselmouth but to beg Ron not to turn on you over it. I think you've known for some time that you could talk to snakes but were afraid to let anyone know. So how old were you the first time?"

Jim bit his lip nervously. "I was six, okay? I was six years old and I talked to a snake out in our parents' garden. And then Mum told me what it meant to be a Parselmouth and how I shouldn't let anyone know because they'd ... they'd act pretty much like everyone in this school has this year."

"Yeah, because you concealed something about yourself that you found frightening so that when it finally came out, everyone else found it frightening too. Very brave of you!"

"Shut up! Are you going to help me or not?!"

Harry stepped right up to Jim's face. "I'll help you. I'll go down into the Chamber of Secrets with you and help you fight a basilisk and save Ron Weasley. But I want something in return. Something only you can give me."

Jim snorted. "Just like last year with Hagrid's dragon, huh? Well I don't happen to have an invisibility cloak to loan to you right now."

"I don't want your cloak, Jim. If I do this and we both survive, I want you to talk to the *Daily Prophet*, *Teen Witch Weekly*, the Wizzarding Wireless and every other media outlet you can think of and tell them that you're a Parselmouth and there's *nothing wrong with it!* I want you to tell Wizzarding Britain that you have a special ability but it doesn't make you evil or dark or anything like that. That you're still the Boy-Who-Lived. You're just also the Boy-Who-Talks-to-Snakes and that's *fine*. And above all, I want you to tell our bigoted narrow-minded father to accept us both for what we are and to stop being *such a prat!*"

By that point, Jim had gone so pale he looked nearly sick. "I ... I..."

"Spit it out, Little Brother."

"I ... can't," Jim said in a soft broken voice.

"Harry?" Ginny said nervously. Harry turned to her with a smile.



"It's quite alright, Ginny. Despite what I said, I have every intention of helping to save Ron." He turned back towards Jim with a look of contempt. "I just wanted to see for myself the full measure of Gryffindor courage." Then, he turned away again and sauntered towards the middle of the room, popping out his wand as he did.

**"SCRUTIMINIUS SECRET PASSAGE!"** he intoned. Nothing happened. He sighed and started rubbing his forehead with the tip of his wand. "No, of course not. It couldn't possibly have been that easy." He thought for a moment and then raised his wand again. **"SCRUTIMINIUS SNAKE!"** With that, the tip of his wand lit up, and he heard the distinctive hum of the Detection Charm. He let the wand lead him to a sink on the other side of the room, and after examining it for a few seconds, he noticed that there was an odd engraving on the tap – one that resembled a small snake.

"Yo! *Heir of Slytherin!* You're up!" Harry called in the direction of his brother. With an angry grimace, Jim walked over to the sink, examined the engraving, and then hissed the Parseltongue word for "Open," though only Harry could have known what he'd said. There was a grinding sound, and the sink slid away to reveal a hole in the floor.

"Well done, Little Brother," Harry said condescendingly. "Okay, Ginny and Amy, you'll stay here and wait for help while Jim and I..." Before he could get any farther, Ginny snorted loudly.

"That'll be the day," she said before jumping feet first down the hole before Harry could stop her.

"Ginny!" Jim exclaimed before jumping down the hole after her. Harry had to dash to grab Amy before she could follow

suit, and he had to physically pick her up and drag her away from the entrance.

"Let me go!"

"No way! You've done enough Gryffindoring for one day, Miss Wilkes. Besides, I made a promise to keep you out of trouble, and I've been far too lax about that recently."

"What?! A promise to who?"

"To someone who cares about you a great deal," he said simply, yet that was enough to make Amy Wilkes stop struggling and look up at him in shock as she absorbed what he'd said. Then, she shook her head stubbornly.

"Whatever. Ginny is my friend and needs my help. And you can't stop me from going down there after her!"

"Fine," Harry said. "But can I at least say one more thing in an attempt to persuade you?"

"What?" she asked.

"**DUROS.**" he said with a smile, holding his wand up as he did. Instantly, a thin but durable wall materialized between the two. It didn't quite reach to the ceiling, but it was high enough to separate Amy from that part of the room where the opening was located.

"DAMMIT HARRY!" she yelled furiously before kicking the wall and then yelling in pain.

"Careful, Wilkes. You'll break a toe or something." Harry had pulled himself up to the top of the wall to poke his head over it. "This wall is pretty sturdy if not quite as tall as I'd wanted. Now once I've gone down, deactivate the ward I

put on the door. It's strong from the other side, but from inside where we are, it can be brought down with a simple Finite. Then, tell the prefects what's happened and find out if the aurors are on their way."

"I thought the aurors couldn't get in," Amy said in a sulking voice.

"Well, maybe they've had ... some ... luck," Harry said, his voice trailing off as he looked towards Myrtle's stall. Then, he cursed loudly. "Dammit. It's been five minutes. Guess it's time for me to reveal what an idiot I've been again! No wonder the Ashwinder doesn't like me."

"What?"

"Never mind! Okay, new plan. Contact my father and tell him everything we've learned about Myrtle and Tom Riddle. Ask him to see if that's enough new evidence to reopen the investigation into Myrtle's death. That should give them enough of a pretext to enter the castle, and then they can come help us."

"And what makes you think your father or anyone else will listen to *me*?" she asked.

Harry fixed her with the same look of serene confidence he'd given Draco at the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match. "You'll find a way to make it happen," he said. "I have complete confidence in you."

And Amy Wilkes's eyes widened slightly as she realized it was true. He believed that she could get it done. She nodded at him seriously, as if accepting an assignment from a trusted superior. Then, Harry dropped back down and turned back towards the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. He almost stepped off into the opening as Ginny

and Jim had done, but then, he caught himself and stared at the opening for a few seconds before breaking out in a grin. He scooped up his robes in his free hand, crouched, and jumped up into the air. "***PROTEGO ORBIS.***" The shield wrapped itself around Harry in mid-air, and he fell for just a second. Then, the orb stopped before lowering itself down the hole at a controlled but determined pace.

*"Never let it be said," the Slytherin thought to himself, "that Harry Potter doesn't travel in style."*

# **The Chamber of Secrets**

## **CHAPTER 43: The Chamber of Secrets**

Ginny's decision to jump down the hole that led to the Chamber of Secrets was an impulsive one, but she could never countenance being left behind and certainly not when the life of one of her brothers was at stake. That didn't change the fact that it *was* an impulsive decision, as she realized once it was too late to turn back and she could only wait to find out the hard way what was at the bottom of the tunnel she was now sliding down at breakneck speed. For all she knew, it might lead to a bottomless pit or a bed of spikes or simply the Basilisk's gaping maw. Indeed, there might not even be a need for an actual trap of some kind – given her speed, she could simply fly out of the bottom and crash into a wall. A pair of broken legs might be just as deadly as a pit of acid if no one knew where she was or how to get to her. Thus, she was greatly relieved when the steep slide finally bottomed out into a relatively flat arc that slowed her descent before dumping her out on the ground, if not gently, then at least without injury onto a filthy stone floor.

From somewhere back up the slide, Ginny heard a noise that sounded quite alarming until she realized it was merely Jim Potter yelling "Waahooo!" at the top of his lungs as he slid down. She rolled over to one side while briefly wondering how she'd ever had a crush on the boy. Even as serious as the situation was, he couldn't resist treating the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets as if it were an amusement park ride! A few seconds later, Jim shot out of the opening face-first and landed on the ground with a loud "*Whoof!*" He got up slowly, rubbing his nose with a pained

hiss after sliding it across the floor. By the time he'd gotten up, Ginny had already cast a Lumos, and the light from her wand revealed a twenty-foot diameter circular corridor with a stonework floor. To her great relief, there was no immediate sign of a Basilisk. Then, she heard another rattling sound from back up the way she'd come, and a few seconds later, Harry Potter floated briskly through the opening while seated in a cross-legged position. He came to a stop in midair and then casually put his feet down onto the ground. Ginny and Jim stared at him in complete amazement.

"What?" Harry said with the faintest smirk on his face. "Protego Orbis. I didn't know what would be down here, after all. If nothing else, I didn't want to end up covered in filth." He nodded at the other two who were, indeed, covered head to toe in centuries of dust and grime. Then, he reached up with his free hand and tapped his glasses in a rhythmic pattern. Instantly, the lenses went black.

"Are sunshades really helpful down here?" Jim asked irritably.

"These are. I just activated the low-light function. To me, this corridor is now brightly lit. And in fact, Ginny, I'll ask you not to wave that Lumos in my face, thank you very much. It's very distracting."

"Whatever," Jim said before heading down the corridor.

"Don't get too far ahead, Jim!" Harry said in a deliberately patronizing tone. "After all, it's not like you have *a wand or anything!*"

Ginny and Harry followed after Jim. "So why *are* you here?" Ginny whispered. "Just to annoy Jim? I mean, let's be honest, I *know* you don't particularly like Ron or anything."

"No, but I like you and the rest of your family, and I don't fancy explaining to your mother that I let you get eaten by a giant snake while I was hiding in the girls' bathroom. Also, I owe George a life-debt, so I sort of felt obligated."

"Do you mean to say you actually felt compelled by the debt you owed George to come risk your life down here?"

"Between you and me? I don't think so. *But* if anyone else asks why I did something as Gryffindorish as this, the life-debt's my story and I'm sticking to it."

With that, the trio moved on through the gloomy tunnel. After a few minutes, the tunnel opened up into a larger cave and they stopped. Up ahead, they could just make out in the darkness what looked like a massive snake lying motionless on the other side of some rocks.

"You two stay here," he whispered. "I'll creep up and get a better view. If it is the Basilisk, maybe it's asleep or something and we can sneak past it."

"That's stupid!" Harry whispered back urgently. "Why should you go alone?"

"Because as you pointed out, I'm the one without a wand, so I reckon that makes me the most expendable right now." And with that, Jim crept off towards the opening, leaving an anxious Harry and Ginny behind. Harry was just about to follow when Jim stopped and visibly relaxed. He turned back and called to the two Slytherins.

"It's okay! It's just a shed skin. Pretty big though!"

Relieved and yet annoyed that Jim was yelling and perhaps giving away their position, Harry stood and headed towards his brother, with Ginny following close behind. When he was

ten feet away, though, Harry froze in shock. Then, in one swift movement, he pushed Ginny backwards. "GINNY, GET DOWN!" he yelled before charging straight at Jim. The Gryffindor had no time to react before Harry tackled him, his force carrying them both ten or so feet further into the open area.

Barely a second later, the runes Jim had unwittingly been standing upon exploded, causing rocks to fall down from the ceiling to block the entrance through which they'd come.

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?!" Jim yelled while trying not to choke on dust.

"Explosive runes, *obviously!*" Harry said harshly. "Not nearly as big as the ones that blew up Greenhouse #3 this morning, but enough to kill if you're standing on top of them. And you're welcome!" Harry ran back to where the rocks had fallen and shouted urgently for Ginny.

"GINNY! GINNY! ARE YOU OKAY?!" From the other side of the rock fall, he could hear some coughing and a muffled reply.

"I'm fine! I was clear of the explosion, but the way is blocked on my side. What do I do now?"

Harry exhaled in relief. "Start trying to clear the rubble away! But be careful! We'll go ahead and get Ron, but we may need to leave in a hurry!"

"Okay! Be careful guys!"

Harry stepped reluctantly away from the rubble and turned back to Jim with an angry expression. "Come on," he said. "*And watch where you're going!*"



Chastened, Jim nodded, and then he and Harry continued on past the enormous snake skin into the next tunnel. Both of them were equally shaken to see confirmation of the Basilisk's size.

"Plus," Harry muttered, "now we're down to *one* wand."

"Nobody asked you to come," Jim snapped.

"Actually, you *did* ask me to come. And then accused me of being a coward when I said it was a bad idea."

"Yeah, well ... you still came in the end. So much for Slytherin cunning."

Harry gaped at that remark. Then, he laughed at what Jim had said. After a few seconds, Jim laughed as well and shook his head at the absurdity of their situation before the two continued down the path. Along the way, they found two more sets of explosive runes on the floor. Harry used the Color-Changing Charm to turn each of them fluorescent orange, and the two carefully edged around each in turn. Eventually, they arrived at a huge sealed door barred by locks that resembled huge metal snakes. Faintly glowing orbs cast some illumination, though only Harry with his glasses could see clearly. Jim noticed.

"So what all enchantments do you have on those glasses anyway?"

"Unbreakable. Can't fall off accidentally. Water-repellent. Light-resistant and light-intensifying, as needed. Plus a few other bits and bobs."

"Anything in there to protect you from the Basilisk's gaze?"

"Surprisingly, that was not offered as an option by the wizarding optometrist. I'll have to ask and see if he can custom order that for me."

Jim chuckled and then examined the vault door. "Now what?" Jim asked. Harry shrugged.

"Try telling it to *open* again. That worked before."

Jim glanced at Harry before taking a deep breath and hissing the word *open* in Parseltongue. The massive snake-locks unlocked themselves and the door slid open. On the inside, there was a long pathway flanked by massive brass snake heads, each of which had water pouring out of its mouth and into a narrow channel on each side of the walkway. Beyond them on either side were massive columns supporting a roof which so high as to be shrouded in darkness. At the far end was a massive sculpture of a bearded man easily forty feet tall with a huge flowing beard. His features were fierce yet noble, and Harry was surprised to find that even Salazar Slytherin's image had not escaped slander by the Ministry – the man's face showed nothing of the "monkey-like" description that was in all the official depictions of him.

Then, Jim gasped, and Harry saw what had startled him: Ron Weasley's prone body was lying face-up on the floor just under the statue, the Diary still clutched in his hands.

"RON!" Jim abandoned all discretion and ran towards his friend, while Harry followed behind more warily. Jim dropped to his knees next to the boy and tried to shake him awake. "Come on, Ron! Please don't be dead!" he said in a distraught voice. Then, he tried to pull the Diary away but screamed in pain and jerked his hands away, shaking them

from the shock damage the cursed book had inflicted from just a second of contact.

Harry pointed his wand at the unconscious figure.

"**BIOGNOSIS.**" The spell was a basic diagnostic charm which Professor Lockhart had taught the previous January as part of the unit on first aid. In response, ghostly symbols appeared floating in the air over Ron's body.

"Hmm. According to this, he's fine physically ... except for the part where he's dying."

"WHAT!?" Jim exclaimed.

"What I said. There's nothing physically wrong with him, but somehow his vitals are fading for no reason. It's like ... like the life is draining out of him. The Diary's work, I expect." Baffled, Harry moved around to the other side of Ron to where the boy's book-bag had been left. Inside he found the boy's normal schoolbooks, the invisibility cloak, a blank parchment which he assumed was the Weasley Twins' map, and an ash wand which he handed off to his brother, who promptly kissed it as if greeting a loved one after a long absence.

"Eww!" said Harry. "Don't kiss it! You don't know what Evil Possessed Ron's been doing with it!"

"Harry, shut up!" Jim replied irritably before returning to his friend. "Ron! Come on, wake up, Ron!"

"I'm afraid Ron won't be waking up, Jim," said a voice from nearby, one Jim found familiar. "You see, as he grows weaker, I grow ..."

"**STUPIFY!**" Jim sent his strongest Stunner towards Tom Riddle who was suddenly standing just a few feet away. It

passed through him harmlessly, and he sneered at the boy.

"In this form, Potters, I am quite immune to even the most potent of attack spells. *Now, as I was saying*, as Ron grows weaker, I grow stronger. Not that you two will be around long enough to witness my full corporeality." He turned towards Harry. "I enjoyed the chance to meet the famous Boy-Who-Lived earlier. I learned *so much* about your brother from my ... interactions with Ronald. But I must say it's a pleasure to meet *you* in the flesh as well, *Harry Potter*."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Harry said drily as he and Jim rose slowly. Harry had spent hours researching Tom Riddle ever since Dumbledore had told him about the "brilliant young Slytherin" with whom he and Jim shared a brother wand, yet he'd never found an actual picture of him. He was surprised that Riddle for some reason seemed oddly familiar.

"Oh, the pleasure's all mine, Harry," Riddle continued in an unctuous voice. "I've learned a great deal about you both from young Ronald's memories, but *especially* all about your exciting adventure last year in which you both successfully fought off Lord Voldemort himself. I'm very interested to learn how the two of you managed such an impossible feat. How did two mere First Years manage to defeat the greatest wizard of all time?!"

Harry turned towards Jim as if confused. "Did we defeat Merlin last year?! I don't remember that *at all*!"

"No, no," Jim replied. "I'm pretty sure Tommy Boy is just a Voldemort fan-boy. Which makes no sense actually. Voldemort was after your time."

Riddle sneered hatefully at the boys. "Lord Voldemort is my past, my present, and my future!" With that, he pointed towards the Diary and then snapped his fingers. To the boys' surprise, the gold lettering on the front cover floated up and expanded in the air to spell out "TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE." Then, Tom waved his hand, and the letters slowly rearranged themselves to spell out different words.

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT.

Both boys were shocked by the revelation. "Voldemort?!" Jim said in a shaking voice. "You ... you're Voldemort." Riddle began to respond when Harry rather loudly interrupted.

"IT'S AN *ANAGRAM*?" Jim actually jumped at the force of Harry's exclamation. "I just thought it was *bad French*! But do you mean to tell me that the Great and Terrible Lord Voldemort got his name from an *anagram* when he was a *teenager*?! What happened? Did you get *bored* in History of Magic and say to yourself '*I swear, if Binns talks about Goblin Wars one more time, I'll go mad and become a genocidal Dark Lord!*' I've got even *less* respect for Tom Riddle and Voldemort *both* than I had before I came down here!"

"Alas, *Potter*," Riddle spat angrily, "I didn't change my name to please the likes of you! I wanted a name to strike fear into my enemies, one that would no longer carry the stain of my filthy Muggle father!"

"Wait, what?" Jim asked in confusion. "Voldemort has a *Muggle father*?!"

"Yes, Jim," Harry said irritably. "Try to keep up. And besides, Tom, it's not like your mother was any great prize!"

Even Jim was shocked by Harry's rude comment, while Riddle inhaled furiously. "How *dare* you!" he snapped. Harry just sniffed disdainfully.

"I've made you my business, Tom Marvolo Riddle, ever since I found out about your history and ancestry. Your grandfather and namesake, Marvolo Gaunt, was the *last* lord of House Gaunt. He was expelled from his Wizengamot seat in 1921 after showing up drunk to a legislative session and firing a Bludgeoning Curse at Lady Sapphira Doge while she was giving a speech in favor of criminalizing Muggle-hunting. The criminal fines and civil penalties bankrupted House Gaunt, and today, the former Gaunt Manor is the refurbished summer home of Donaghan Tremlett, the bassist for the Weird Sisters." Harry paused and grinned broadly "He's a Muggleborn, you know!"

Riddle snarled, but Harry was just getting warmed up.

"Your Uncle Morfin Gaunt started at Hogwarts in 1911, but he flunked out during his fourth year due to failing grades and violent assaults on fellow students. There's no record of him ever sitting for his OWLS. Your mother Merope Gaunt ... *she never even got a Hogwarts letter.*" Harry laughed maliciously, so much so that it unnerved Jim.

"You know, Tom, in a fine old Pureblood family like the Gaunts, they have a word for children who don't get Hogwarts letters: *Squibs*. And they've got another word for the children of squibs and Muggles." Harry took a step towards the furious shade and grinned wickedly.

"*Mudbloods!*"

For a few seconds, the shade of Tom Riddle was too angry to even speak. Finally, he collected himself. "Then it is a good thing, Harry Potter, that in a few minutes, you'll be

carrying the secret of my lineage to your *graves*. But you won't be the last!" He looked back and forth between the two boys with equal measures of hatred. "When Ron Weasley is dead and I am fully corporeal, I have many things to do before Lord Voldemort is *fully* reborn. But I think I've time enough to pay a visit to the infirmary, where a helpless and pitiful Albus Dumbledore waits for someone to put him out of his misery."

"*You will not lay a FINGER on Albus Dumbledore!*" Jim bellowed in a rage. "*Not while there's a breath in my body!*"

"Yes, well, very soon there *won't be*, Jim. You'll be preceding the old man in death, and soon Dumbledore will be nothing but a memory!

"Albus Dumbledore will never be gone from Hogwarts! Not while there's a single person left to remain loyal to him!"

Suddenly, from elsewhere in the chamber, there was a triumphant cry, and Fawkes, the Headmaster's phoenix familiar flew in carrying something in his talons. The phoenix circled and then dropped its cargo which landed nearby. It was the Sorting Hat. Riddle and both Potters stared at it in surprise before the shade snorted in amusement.

"So this is what Dumbledore sends his great defenders: a songbird and an old hat."

"Yeah," said Harry ruefully. "I have to say I'm a bit disappointed myself." Apparently, the Hat heard the boy's complaint as it let out a loud "ha-rumph!" in response.

Riddle turned away from the boys, raised his hands in supplication to the stone face of Salazar Slytherin, and began to speak in Parseltongue.

"Sssspeak to me...!"

Snickt! "**SILENCIO!**"

Instantly, Tom Riddle whirled around in a rage and began mouthing vulgar insults in the direction of Harry Potter, none of which could be heard.

"Right," Harry said calmly. "That's that, then." Then, he bent down to pick up Ron's bag while Jim looked back and forth between Harry and Riddle

"What?" he said.

"I said, '*that's that.*' We're done here." He gave his confused sibling a cheeky smile. "You see, Little Brother, this is why it's important to learn the *theory* behind magic instead of just memorizing all the spells that you think you can use in a fight. Most attack spells require a physical form to target, and the Stunner, in particular, only works on things with functioning nervous systems. The Silencing Charm, on the other hand, will work on *anything* capable of making a sound, including ghosts and other intangible spirits. It was all on last year's Charms final." Harry pointed his wand towards the Diary. "**ACCIO DIARY.**" The book flew out of Ron's grip, and Harry caught it within the book-bag containing the invisibility cloak and all Ron's other things. Then, he casually slung the bag over his shoulder.

"Now then, I'm going out to help Ginny open up a passage. And since you're the one who's been *working out* all year long, you can bring Ron. I guess a Fireman's Carry would work the best if you know how to do that." And with that, he turned towards the door.

"Wait, Harry!" Jim exclaimed as he grabbed Harry by the arm. "We can't just ... *leave* Riddle down here!" He pointed



back towards the silent Riddle who was just glaring at them hatefully. "Can we?"

"Why not? The Silencio will last for a few hours unless somebody cancels it, and I'm pretty sure Ole Tom here, being an immaterial spirit with no wand, can't manage the wandless, wordless magic needed to do that himself. The only thing he could do to harm us is to summon and command the Basilisk, which he *can't* now. So, as I said, we're done here. Let's get Ron up topside where there's a school nurse, mostly likely a squad of aurors, and if all else fails, a fireplace that can connect to St. Mungo's."

"But ... we *can't*," Jim said in tongue-tied frustration. "I mean ... there's, you know, *a Basilisk* down here!" Then, he waved his arms as if helpless to explain any further. Harry studied his brother for a moment. Then, his eyes narrowed and his face darkened in anger.

"I. Don't. *Believe*. You!" he said through gritted teeth. Jim was surprised and slightly alarmed to realize he'd somehow made his brother angry.

"What?" he asked carefully.

"You're *angry*. You're actually *angry* that Slytherin cunning has resolved this whole problem simply and efficiently and thus deprived you of the chance to have some magnificent battle between yourself and Salazar Slytherin's giant ruddy snake!"

"... no?" Jim said with obvious embarrassment.

"*YES!* You said you wanted us to rescue Ron, but now that we're here and miraculously able to do that, you're *angry* that you won't get some great ... *Gryffindorish* battle against one of the deadliest

creatures on Earth which is *also* the totemic symbol of my House! Unbelievable!"

"Harry...!" Jim said, his own anger starting to rise.

"You know, calling you a *git* seems inadequate somehow!" Harry said on a roll. "You're the Lord High Git of the British Isles! The Emperor Git of the World! No, wait! The *Supreme Git of the Universe!*"

"STOP CALLING ME A GIT!" Jim yelled.

"STOP ACTING LIKE A GIT! Harry yelled back.

"***EXPELLIARMUS DUO!***" Ron Weasley yelled to them both. Instantly, both boys' wands flew out of their hands to land on the ground somewhere behind the boy. Ron's wand was now pointed at the Potter Brothers. His face was a mask of contempt, and his eyes glowed a red the color of blood.

Harry and Jim stared in shock at Ron for a few seconds. Then, Harry whirled back towards Jim, still as angry as he was before.

"And on top of *EVERYTHING ELSE*, Jim, you got me so *angry* that I COMPLETELY FORGOT that the Diary can *possess* Ron!"

"Harry, SHUT UP!" Jim exclaimed before turning to his possessed friend. "Ron, listen to me! If there's any part of you that can understand me now, *you've got to fight Riddle!*"

The possessed boy sneered hatefully at his former friend. "Sorry, Jim. Ron's not here at the moment. Normally, I just put him into a deep dreamless sleep when I need direct

control. But he's been a bit difficult lately, so I thought some punishment was in order. At the moment, Ron Weasley believes that he's sealed in a pine coffin that's buried six feet underground in a forgotten forest. It's cold, it's wet, it's pitch black ... and he is *covered* in spiders."

Jim blanched. He knew all too well about Ron's arachnophobia. "Ron" laughed at his expression of horror.

"He's calling for you, Jim. After everything that's happened, poor widdle Ron Weasley is screaming your name, begging you to forgive him his sins and save him from his fate." Then, the smile melted off the boy's face. "I just wanted you to know that before you *died*!" Then, he whirled around, and while keeping a wand on Jim and Harry, finished the phrase that opened up the chamber holding the Basilisk.

"Ssspeak to me, Ssslytherin! Greatessst of the Hogwartsss Four!" With a terrible grinding sound, the mouth of the face slowly started to lower, and from inside, Jim could hear a terrible hissing sound drawing nearer, one that spoke a mighty creatures hunger and desire to rip and shred its master's enemies.

"Okay, this is bad, but it's not the end of the world," Jim said in a shaky voice. "We just need to stay calm. We may not have wands, but we do have the invisibility..." Jim turned towards Harry only to see that the other boy was gone. "... cloak." He whirled around wildly and realized that his brother seemed to have vanished completely.

"Godammit, Harry!" he spat under his breath before turning tail and running away from the approaching Basilisk, slowing down only just enough to scoop up the Sorting Hat off the floor. Behind him, Jim could hear the

sounds of Ron's voice hissing instructions in Parseltongue and the great serpent hissing back its obedience.

"Parseltongue won't save you, Potter. The Basilisk listens only *to me!* Now, let's see how Slytherin's Monster fares against the Great Jim Potter!"

Jim ran as fast as he could among the tall columns hoping that they were too close together for the snake to fit through. Then, he heard Fawkes's cry again, followed by Ron shouting angrily, and the Basilisk squealing in pain. He risked a glance back, and from a shadow on the wall, he could tell that Fawkes had successfully clawed out the Basilisk's eyes, thus neutralizing its petrification gaze.

"Your eyes will grow back eventually, my pet! Not even the talons of a phoenix can permanently mar you! And in the meantime, you can still smell Potter!" The Basilisk roared its agreement and then took off in the direction of where Jim was hidden. The boy ran, dodging columns as he went before darting down a side corridor with the snake close behind. Ron watched them depart and then started scanning the room for any signs of the other Potter's presence.

"Come out, Harry Potter. You may not be as brave as your Gryffindor brother, but that's no reason to be an utter coward!" There was a sound nearby, and Ron whirled around, letting loose with a Cutting Curse before he could even find the source of the sound. It was just a pebble skittering across the floor. Ron studied it with a frown and then whirled around towards the direction it had come from, but it was already too late.

"***EXPPELLIARMUS! INCARCEROUUS!***" The two spells hit the possessed boy before he had any chance to spot his

opponent. The wand flew across the room towards Harry whose arm and head were all that was visible beneath the cloak. He caught the wand easily just as the bound Ron dropped to the floor.

"Alright, then," said Harry as he removed the clock, pocketing the spare wand as he did while keeping his own wand on his captive. "My brother has his snake to play with, so it's just you and me for now. Let's get better acquainted."

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### ***Jim and the Hat...***

As Jim darted his way through the tall columns, he could hear the Basilisk behind him drawing ever nearer. It couldn't see him (though he thought he saw signs of the snake's eyes slowly regenerating), but the creature's senses of hearing and smell were undiminished. Jim's luck held, though, as he found an opening in the wall too small for the serpent to get through, one that dumped him into a channel flooded with brackish water. He coughed up the foul water and then coughed again from the dust that rained down on him from above as the Basilisk futilely bashed its head against the narrow opening. Wiping his brow clear of the filthy water, Jim stood up and staggered down the dark tunnel and away from the madly hissing snake.

After a few seconds though, he was in pitch darkness and couldn't risk proceeding any further. Exhausted, hurt, and beaten down, he finally remembered the musty (and now drenched) Sorting Hat still clutched in his hand. After wringing it out as best he could, Jim put the Hat on his head.

"I don't appreciate being wrung out like an old dishrag, Mr. Potter," it said.

"Yeah, well, I don't appreciate letting something that's been drenched in toilet water sit on my head, but we'll both have to make the best of it. Now, can you give me any help?"

"Not directly, I'm afraid."

"So why did Fawkes bring you then? Moral support? A song of encouragement, maybe?"

"Don't be facetious, Mr. Potter. I said I couldn't give *direct* aid. You can blame Godric for that, actually. When the four Founders had their little argument over the Basilisk's design, Godric *could* have insisted on having the same influence over it that Rowena Ravenclaw received."

"What sort of influence?" Jim asked.

"Let's just say that if you had the *different* item of head gear right now, you could simply order the Basilisk away. But you don't, so here we are." The Hat paused. "Actually, I take it back. There *is* one form of direct aid I can give you."

With that, Jim gasped. Even though the Hat was covering his eyes, he found that he could now see perfectly well despite the darkness of the tunnel.

"Nice!" he said. He thought for a few seconds about what the Hat had said. "Godric *could* have asked for influence over the Basilisk, but he didn't. So what *did* he ask for?"

"Ah, now you're finally *thinking*. From the start, Godric believed that the Basilisk was too dangerous to be allowed in the school no matter how many constraints were placed upon it."

"And obviously, he was right," Jim interrupted.

"I take back what I said about you thinking. The Basilisk lay in its secret chamber for over eight centuries without incident until Tom Riddle gained access to it. If anything, the mistake was Rowena's. Only a Parselmouth who also possessed the Ravenclaw Diadem could overcome the Basilisk's conditioning and use it against the Headmaster and the rest of the faculty, to say nothing of using against other Parselmouths. The serpent was always particularly susceptible to Parseltongue; but for the prevailing influence of the Diadem, you'd be able to control it just as well as ... any other Parselmouth.

Jim thought about that. "So what *did* Godric Gryffindor demand in exchange for letting Slytherin grow his Basilisk?"

"Unfortunately, I can't answer that. Not yet."

"Why not?! Lives are in danger!"

"I'm well aware of that, Mr. Potter. But I am constrained by the limitations placed on me by my creator just as the Basilisk is by its. I can't give you the aid you need until you prove yourself *worthy*."

"And how do I do that?" Jim said impatiently.

The Hat hesitated before finally speaking. "Let's start by talking about your family."

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### ***Harry and Tom ...***

Ron's face twisted into an inhuman snarl as Tom Riddle spoke through him. "You actually mean to interrogate me, boy?"

Harry shrugged. "We've got some time to kill while Jim's handling the snake."

Ron laughed. "You believe Jim Potter stands a chance against the Basilisk?"

"As obnoxious as my brother is, he has a way of pulling off miracles where Voldemort is concerned."

"Well, I hope you aren't expecting him to charm his way out. The Basilisk responds to my will and mine alone."

"Ah," said Harry brightly. "So you *do* have the Diadem of Ravenclaw. The only way to control the Basilisk that trumps Parseltongue!"

Ron's eyes widened slightly. "Very astute. I have ... claimed mastery of the Diadem, though it's not with me now. I can access its properties from any distance so I keep it in a safe place. I take it you found the 1st Edition of **Hogwarts: A History**?"

Harry nodded. "To be honest, I'm wondering how Dumbledore and everyone else missed it."

The possessed boy smirked, and Harry suppressed the urge to fist-pump. He'd known from his last encounter with Voldemort that the enemy couldn't resist the chance to show off his own cleverness.

"By writing messages from '*the Heir of Slytherin*,' I directly invoked the government-sponsored propaganda about Slytherin and his supposed desire to purge the school of Mudbloods. Dumbledore knew that Slytherin didn't really have any such desire, nor any heirs that Hogwarts was capable of recognizing. When he researched more recent books about the school, they all agreed that the Chamber of



Secrets was just a legend, and Professor Binns was insistent that the Chamber and the Monster didn't exist. Accepting all that at face value, Dumbledore naturally assumed that the '*Heir of Slytherin*' references were a red-herring meant to lead him astray and that the true cause of the petrifications was some new curse or dark object that had been smuggled into the school in 1943. The Ministry banned all copies **Hogwarts: A History** prior to its fourth edition and burned most of those editions it could find in the early 17th century, so it's quite possible that Dumbledore didn't even know the school had a copy of the highly-illegal *first edition* locked away in a vault within the Restricted Section." Ron laughed. "Reports of Albus Dumbledore's omniscience were always overrated."

"I'll keep that in mind in the future," Harry said. "I take it he never even tried to read you with Legilimency?"

"Natural Occlumens, since early childhood. I suspect that was part of why the old fool distrusted me so much. Oh, and for the record, Potter? You shouldn't count on having a future."

"*Moving along*," Harry said archly, "if even Dumbledore didn't know about the first edition book, how did you find it?"

Ron studied Harry for a few seconds and then smiled. "How else? Several facets of the Hydra are prone to gossip, as I'm sure you know."

Harry stayed silent.

"Oh yes, Harry Potter. I've known for months that you're a Parselmouth who seeks to become the next Prince of Slytherin, despite your debased lineage. But you're not there yet, and a Prince-Emeritus has privileges that outrank

a mere claimant like yourself. I commanded the Hydra Throne to refuse to acknowledge any Parselmouth but me, and it conveyed my orders to the rest of the school's serpents. I knew it would be impossible to move freely about the school, let alone make use of the Basilisk, if the Hogwarts serpents were providing you with intelligence."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I'd figured as much. I owe you for that, Tom Riddle." He took a deep breath. "But what I really want to know right now is ... what happened to you?! Tom Riddle was respected by most of the school as a Muggleborn who'd been successful in *Slytherin* at a time when Blood Purity politics was at its height. Granted, your fellow Slytherins must have treated you awfully, but you had a network of Muggleborn friends that you were forging into a powerful clique, one of whom went on to become the first Muggleborn *Minister of Magic*! And then, you threw it all away to change your name, invent a new heritage, and become the leader of a Pureblood death cult. Did accidentally killing Myrtle Warren affect you that much?"

"Spare me your appeals to sentimentality, Potter. The Mudblood's death meant nothing to me!"

"Now see, I don't believe a word of that. Sociopaths can be charming, but not that charming. Too many people found you likeable for it to all be an act, and Myrtle still cares for you and believes you cared about her even though she *died* as a result of your actions. She also says that *after* she died, you *changed*. Guilty heart, Tom?"

Ron laughed menacingly. "I did change that night, but for the better! You're right, Potter. Up until the night Myrtle died, I was still weak, still convinced that I could change the system from within. That I could gain power with the aid of my *friends*." The last word fairly dripped with contempt.

"But as that ... *Mudblood* lay on the floor dead, I suddenly realized what a fool I was to have ever cared for anyone else. I almost succumbed to weakness then, but I found the strength to resist and power through. And that's when I realized the singular truth that has guided me ever since – *other people don't matter*. Now do you understand?"

Harry sat silently as he absorbed what Ron – no, what *Voldemort* – had said. Harry understood perfectly – understood and shuddered at the knowledge. The boy now knew exactly how Tom Riddle became Voldemort ... because he had come within an angel's breath of doing the very same thing himself. The previous summer, barely a week after Elizabeth Podmore was killed simply for the sin of being an invited guest at the Potter birthday party, Harry stood in Artemus Podmore's office and watched the man break down in tears. In response, Harry felt his own heart overflow with grief and regret and shame and survivor guilt, as well as an empathy for Artie's suffering that was so deep that it *burned*. At that moment, Harry desperately wanted to simply *not feel* those painful emotions, and even at that early point in his Occlumency training, he knew he had the *option* of not feeling them. And the only reason he *didn't* take that option was because Artie had already reached out to the boy to let him know that the man cared about him and that the late Elizabeth Podmore had cared for him as well, even before they'd met face to face, even though she knew that caring for someone like Harry Potter might be dangerous. With that knowledge, the emotional dam that Harry had unwittingly been building finally burst, and he'd wept alongside Artie, unashamed of his own emotions. And since that day, he'd never again considered using Occlumency to shut those emotions down completely.

But on the night Myrtle Warren died, there had been no one on hand to show similar compassion to the boy who had

accidentally killed her. Raised in a brutal orphanage and Sorted into a House primed to hate him, Tom Riddle had finally found a group of friends to care about and who would care about him... until one of them died because of a stupid accident in the course of a scheme he'd cooked up to make life better for them all. Alone and terrified, grief-stricken and guilt-ridden, Tom Riddle was overcome with negative emotions and decided that whatever the cost, he would never feel that way again. And so he turned his Occlumency inward and permanently destroyed his capacity to feel love or empathy for others.

And thus, Tom Riddle died alongside Myrtle Warren ... and Lord Voldemort was born to take his place.

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### ***Jim and the Hat ...***

"Is this *really* the best time to talk about my family issues?!" Jim snapped.

"No time like the present. It was my understanding that you were supposed to be getting counseling after that unpleasantness with Mr. Rookwood's Occlumency book, but, well, what with one thing after another, it never really happened, now did it?"

"And you're volunteering to be my counselor? Now? While I'm hiding from a giant snake in an ancient sewer?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, I am. Now, first question: What do you believe is the worst thing that can possibly happen to you in the future?"

Jim shook his head at the idiocy of the question. "Pretty sure it's getting *eaten* by the giant snake that's stalking me

through the aforementioned ancient sewer. Can you think of anything worse than that?"

"Well, I *was* beginning to wonder, Mr. Potter. So I take then that you now think *dying* is a worse fate than having to risk the scorn and opprobrium of the wizarding world as a result of being a Parselmouth? Not to mention standing up to your father's bigotry over that same issue?"

"HOW CAN THIS POSSIBLY BE THE TIME TO DISCUSS THIS!?" the boy yelled in a fury.

"It's the only time we have, Jim. Because I cannot help you unless I *know* you're a Gryffindor through and through. Do you know how Godric Gryffindor died, Jim?"

The boy paused, now genuinely curious despite his anger at the Hat. "I dunno. Heroically?"

The Hat laughed softly. "Godric died in his bed and in great pain of an illness that could have been cured had it been caught early. If it *had* been properly diagnosed, he might have lived another twenty or thirty years. But he was afraid of appearing weak before the other Founders. Afraid that what he mistakenly thought were merely the signs of advancing age meant that he would cease to be the *legend* that he had become in the eyes of the witches and wizards who thought him an invincible hero. And so he concealed his growing weakness from the other Founders until it was too late."

Jim was surprised to hear the profound sadness in the Hat's voice. Then, he remembered – the Sorting Hat had actually been Godric Gryffindor's *own personal hat* until he'd enchanted it to sort the students.

"You're quite right, Jim," the Hat said softly, surprising the boy by reading his thoughts. "While I was not given the task of Sorting until Hogwarts first opened, Godric's magic made me self-aware long before then. I was his companion and advisor for many, many years even as I tirelessly kept the rain and sun off of his brow."

Jim stood still and thought about everything the Hat had said. Did he really think that risking his life to be a hero was preferable to the *mere thought* of people ... not *liking* him? He took a deep breath to steady himself as he explored that realization.

"Hat? I'm ... pretty messed up, aren't I?"

The Sorting Hat laughed softly. "No more than any other hero, Jim."

"I ... need to save Ron, Hat. I've got a lot of thinking to do ... ya know, if I *survive* this. I ... I don't want to be afraid anymore." He lowered his head. "Assuming we do make it through this, can ... can we speak together again?"

"I'll discuss it with Albus, but I don't think it will be a problem. But first things first – reach inside me."

Confused, Jim took the Hat off and stuck his hand inside. He became even more confused when he discovered he could reach in all the way up to his armpit. Then, his hand found and closed around something hard and unyielding. He withdrew his hand and was amazed to see that he now held a gleaming silver sword inlaid with rubies. On the hilt was inscribed the name *Godric Gryffindor* in a medieval script, and in faint etching along the blade was a Latin inscription that Jim recognized from the bedtime stories his father had told him of Gryffindor when he'd been a child:

*"Sedit qui timuit ne non succederet."*

*"He who feared he would not succeed sat still."*

Jim studied the legendary blade in awe. Then, he placed the Hat back on his head and began searching for a way out of the sewer. He had people to save.

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### ***Harry and Tom ...***

Harry had been quiet for several seconds after his epiphany about Voldemort's personality. He decided to change the subject. But first, he opened up the bag and levitated the Diary out and onto the floor.

"So, the Diary? How does it work? And who taught you the enchantments?"

"No one *taught* me, *Potter!*" Ron spat angrily. Harry thought it was eerie seeing Ron Weasley sneer and spit like early First Year Draco Malfoy.

*"Not to mention the Dark Lord Voldemort is surprisingly immature, at least in this form,"* he noted. *"And conveniently easy to provoke."*

"Really?" Harry said dubiously. "You came up with this yourself?"

Ron raised his chin arrogantly. "The earliest iteration of the Diary I made as a Third Year. A complex variation on the Switching Charm to enchant a regular Muggle diary so that it could record my thoughts and memories and organize them as I wished. It was years after leaving Hogwarts that my little project found a second purpose ... as the *key to my immortality!*"

Harry nodded at that. Then, he whipped out his wand and pointed it at the book on the floor. "**INCENDIO!**" The gout of flames did nothing to the Diary, not even to singe the edges. Ron laughed.

"Fool! The same effect that binds a part of my very soul to that book – and consequently to this foolish boy who so freely used it – also makes the Diary impervious to all spells. Dumbledore himself couldn't undo what I have wrought."

"And now, you're leeching away Ron's life to form a new body for yourself. I bet you didn't learn *that* at Hogwarts."

"The basic concept *was* described in a book I found in the Restricted Section, though I had to search the world to find the actual spell. And yes, before too long, I will be powerful enough to manifest corporeally. And then, none of your tricks will save you."

"Yeah, probably not. Tricks have absolutely never saved me before, not even once. I am curious though. You said earlier that you would become corporeal, presumably in the form of sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle, and then you'd take revenge on Dumbledore before Voldemort was fully reborn. What was that all about?"

The other boy was silent.

"I mean, obviously, Voldemort would not have set up his resurrection so that he would be reborn into the form of an angst-y teenager who looked nothing like the Dark Lord who the Death Eaters used to follow. So what's the plan? Age yourself into Voldemort? Or create a new body for the spirit version of Voldemort we fought last year? I mean, you didn't know anything about what happened last year until Ron told you, so you obviously haven't been connected to the *real* Voldemort since before that. Do you even



remember what happened when Jim destroyed you when he was a baby?"

Ron remained silent, but he was visibly angry now.

"For that matter, do you remember *anything* about what's happened to the *real* Voldemort since the day he put a part of his soul in the book? But no – that would be stupid. Surely Voldemort wouldn't make his resurrection dependent on a copy of himself that was limited to his school day memories, knowledge and personality." Harry thought for a moment. "But then, surely he wouldn't arrange for the piece of his soul that's going to bring him back to life to be sent *to Hogwarts in the hands of someone like Ron Weasley either!* To be carried around by Jim Potter's best friend *under the very nose of Albus Dumbledore himself!* I mean, Voldemort's bold and aggressive and, yes, insane, but not *stupidly* insane. If you're really the only thing keep his soul from moving ... on..." Harry's voice trailed off as he thought back over what he'd just said. Ron studied him carefully while trying to maintain a neutral expression. Harry's eyes widened.

"Oh. Ooooooh! Of course! I see it now!" Harry started pacing excitedly. "You're not Voldemort's *diary!* You're Voldemort's *first draft!* His *prototype!* First, he figures out how to bind a piece of his soul into something in such a way that it will be limited to his sixteen-year-old personality and power levels. That way, if something goes wrong and the soul fragment develops too much independence, he doesn't have to worry about accidentally creating a rival instead of a servant. And then, once he knows the process works..." Harry paused and then looked down at the bound and possessed boy lying at his feet.

"How many of you *are there*, Tom Riddle?" he asked in quiet wonder. "Just how many books and baubles and trinkets did Voldemort leave lying around for innocent dupes to find and start the process of bringing him back?!"

Ron sneered. "That doesn't matter. One is all that's necessary, as you'll see momentarily. Nothing you can do will stop the Diary from doing its work."

Harry stared at the other boy as he considered that. "I suppose it's true that I don't know any spells that can destroy that book. But tell me, is your current *host* also fireproof?"

He pointed his wand at Ron's face, and steeled himself. The possessed boy paled. But then, before Harry could cast any spells, he heard someone running towards him. It was Jim Potter, entering from the far side of Salazar Slytherin's statue, with the Sorting Hat on his head and in his right hand ...

"Seriously?!" Harry yelled in shock and amazement. "You actually *found* the Sword of Gryffindor what's been lost for *centuries*?! What happened? Did you just trip over it in the dark or something?"

"No," Jim replied while trying to catch his breath. "It was inside the Hat!"

"That's ... WHAT?!"

But before Jim could say anything more, there was a rumbling sound from nearby. Then, before either boy could respond, there was an explosion of water from the small moat surrounding Slytherin's stone head, and the Basilisk burst forth with a roar of anger. It immediately tried to smash Jim to a pulp with its body, but the boy was barely

able to leap out of the way. Unfortunately, the force of the creature's impact knocked Jim to the ground hard roughly forty feet away from Harry, and he lost the sword which skidded across the floor before coming to a rest just out of reach of either twin.

"FORGET THAT ONE!" yelled Ron. "KILL THE...!"

"**SILENCIO.**" Harry silenced Ron almost casually without ever taking his eyes off the writhing Basilisk. It roared and lunged again towards Jim who was still on the ground trying to crawl towards the sword.

"**PROTEGO!**" Harry cast the Shield Spell over Jim with all his might, and the Basilisk's attack was deflected ... barely. The force of the blow caused Harry to drop to one knee and cry out in pain. The Basilisk hammered the shield again and again until Harry's eyes started to water from the strain. He couldn't cast any other spells while maintaining the Protego over Jim (who himself couldn't move without leaving the shield and becoming vulnerable), and anyway Harry didn't know *any* spells that could get through the thick hide of the Basilisk. The Sword of Gryffindor which was spelled to incapacitate the beast was lying ten feet away and completely useless. Then, Harry's shield collapsed, and the Basilisk roared in triumph ... only to then shriek in pain as a red light enveloped its head and a voice cried out from someplace nearby.

Harry turned his head and did a double-take. Ginny Weasley stood in the entrance to the Chamber, filthy, bruised, exhausted, and yet strangely exultant. Harry turned back to look at the shrieking Basilisk. It reared up its head, and the snake's giant nostrils expanded and then cracked, spraying out a reddish-grey substance which

coalesced into winged bat-like shapes that began to attack and distract the Basilisk.

Harry stared in slack-jawed amazement as he processed this. "Okay," he thought. "*The Bat-Bogey Hex can apparently affect a Basilisk. Makes sense, I guess, since it specifically targets the nostrils and that lets it bypass the magic-resistant scales. I wonder if that might be a question on my OWLS.*"

Then, shaking off his surprise, he pointed his wand at the nearby sword. "**WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA.**" The blade flew through the air to land in Jim's outstretched hand.

"Thanks!" the boy yelled.

Harry nodded and then tried to yell instructions over the deafening cries of the Basilisk and the two shrieking Basilisk-Bogeys that were still attacking it. "NOW WHILE IT'S DISTRACTED, JUST STAB THE THING! THE SWORD'S ENCHANTED TO PUT IT SLEEP WITH A SINGLE ... *ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME!*"

Unfortunately, Jim either could not hear Harry or he was so focused on his own plan that he was ignoring his twin. Instead, he started yelling and waving his arms to attract the beast's attention. Harry was gobsmacked when he realized what Jim was doing. "*Or I suppose you could just let it EAT YOU and then stab it to death from the inside!*" he thought angrily. "*I guess that would work too!*"

But to Harry's amazement, it appeared that really was the boy's plan! The Basilisk finally noticed Jim's activities and with a roar plunged its gaping maw straight towards the boy. In the distance, Ginny screamed, but Harry could only watch in horror as the huge mouth seemed poised to swallow Jim whole. Then, at the last possible second, Jim

thrust the sword *into* the Basilisk's mouth, and the tip of the blade sliced up through the creature's brain and out the top of its head! By reflex, the Basilisk jerked back, almost pulling the sword out of Jim's hand, and then it flailed in obvious agony before collapsing in a heap. Jim Potter had killed Slytherin's Monster.

If only he'd done it cleanly.

Jim watched the monster die and then gasped in sudden pain. He looked down at his shoulder, and his eyes widened at the sight of the six-inch-long Basilisk fang protruding from it. He reached up and with a painful gasp, pulled the thing free and tossed it across the room. By this time, Ginny had run up to him, and she caught him and supported him before he could fall. The two slowly moved towards Harry and the still-prone Ron.

"Ahem. *As I was saying*, Little Brother, Godric Gryffindor's sword is specifically enchanted to bypass the Basilisk's defenses and neutralize it without difficulty. All you had to do was nick it somewhere, which would have been easy since its scales can't block the magical sword!"

"Harry, stop being a *prat!*" Ginny exclaimed. "Jim's been *bitten!*"

"Yes, I know. I promise it's the very second thing on my to-do list. **ACCIO SWORD.**" With that, the Sword of Gryffindor flew out of Jim's hand, and Harry caught it easily. He retracted his wand and carefully examined the sword.

"Hmm. The fabled Sword of Gryffindor. Just like it was described in **Hogwarts: A History**. And as that book says, it contains the power to absorb into itself the powers and property of whatever it defeats. Which, in this case, means it's now permanently poisoned with basilisk venom." He

turned towards Ron. "The perfect thing for ridding us all of a pesky Dark Lord."

"Harry, NO!" Ginny screamed.

"Harry, don't!" Jim said weakly. "It's not ... Ron's ... fault."

"Oh honestly, you two!" Harry replied. "I'm not dense! I know perfectly well that Ron's just a puppet in all this. And I *also* know who's pulling the strings." With that, he stepped over to the Diary which still lay on the floor. Reversing his grip on the pommel, he raised the sword and then drove it straight through the center of the book. Immediately, Ron threw his head back and screamed, though it was still silenced. Then, Harry put his foot on the book to brace it before grabbing the sword with both hands and slicing it nearly in two. There was a loud pop as Harry's *Silencio* broke, and now all three could hear an unearthly howl emanating from Ron Weasley's mouth. The scream was soon followed by a billowing black smoke that poured from his mouth, his nostrils and his eyes. The smoke rose higher and higher before taking the form of a monstrous black humanoid figure with glowing red eyes. Ginny screamed, but Jim just stared up at the figure resolutely, while Harry actually grinned at it.

"I believe this makes it *Potters 3. Voldemort 0*," he said smugly.

The black figure roared its anger before dissipating into nothingness. Immediately, Harry dropped the sword and pulled his wand to cast a Diagnostic Charm on Ron.

"His life force is no longer being drained," Harry reported. "He's unconscious but otherwise fine. Under the circumstances, though, I'd recommend leaving him to rest."

There's a good chance he'll be traumatized when he wakes up."

"Tha's good. Thans' Har... ry." With that, Jim's knees buckled and he dropped out of Ginny's grasp and onto the floor.

"Jim!" she exclaimed.

Harry sauntered over. "Basilisk venom is one of the most dangerous poisons in the world, Ginny. I expect he'll need a cure within the next minute if he's to have any chance of surviving. Which, to be honest, is the sort of fate one should expect if he does something as stupid as sticking his arm into a Basilisk's mouth!"

*"Merlin, Harr', m'dyin already. Do ya have'ta nag me t'death too?"* Jim smiled weakly at that, while Ginny began to cry.

"Oh, you're not *dying*, Little Brother," Harry said almost mockingly. "Once again, Slytherin cunning is here to save Gryffindor rashness from itself. Because it just so happens that I have..." he reached into an inside pocket to remove a small object, *"a bezoar!"* Harry held the tiny stone up so that Jim could see it and then smiled smugly. Artie Podmore had gotten it for him every since the doxie incident, since if he'd had one and swallowed it, he'd have been completely immune to their poison.

*"Bezoars ... don't work on ... basilisk poison. Snape said so ... firs' day."* Bizarrely, Jim grinned at delivering the news, even as his vision seemed to blur. Immediately, the smile dropped from Harry's face to be replaced by a scowl. He looked away and closed his eyes to bring up the appropriate memory. To Harry's shock, Jim was absolutely right. Snape had specifically said that a bezoar was ineffective against

basilisk poison, but at the time, Harry had been so intent on embarrassing his brother that he failed to absorb the information.

"How the *hell* did you remember that?!" he asked in shock.

Jim coughed. "*Spent ... lotta time ... thinkin' 'bout that day. -cough- Never did 'pologize ta Snape. Do that for me -cough-wouldja, Harry?*"

Harry didn't respond. Instead, he closed his eyes and dilated as hard as he ever had, trying desperately to come up with a plan. But he couldn't. Jim would be dead in under a minute. There was no way to get him to Madam Pomfrey in that time, even assuming she had the means and skill to cure basilisk poison. And St. Mungo's might as well be on the moon as relevant as it was to their present circumstances. So with no other options, Harry did the only thing he could do – seal away his negative emotions for the moment and put on a brave face so that Jim's death would be as peaceful as possible.

"Snape's not big on apologies. I think he considers them a sign of weakness. And anyway, if you really want to apologize to Snape, do it yourself. I don't think for one second you're about to die!"

Jim smiled weakly. "*Basilisk poison, Har' -cough- sorry, you hated it when I called ya that, din't ya -cough-.*"

"My name has two syllable, Jim," Harry said softly. "Just because you can only handle one for yourself doesn't mean you can't handle both of mine."

Jim laughed, but then gasped loudly in pain from the exertion. "*Well, if I can't 'pologize ta Snape ... can I do it for you?*"



"Jim..." Harry started.

*"I was jealous. Can ya believe it? -cough- I ... I never knew 'bout you 'til you got your letter. Then, Mum 'n Dad told me. 'Was afraid you'd hate me for staying w'them while you ... Then, you went t'Slytherin and I was sure you hated me. So I decided ... to hate you back. So stupid."* Then, a single tear flowed down Jim's cheek.

"Stop that," Harry said almost irritably. "No more deathbed confessions. You're *the Boy-Who-Lived*. Chosen by Fate to defeat the Evil Voldemort. Any second now ... I dunno, some absurd deus ex machina is going to show up and miraculously save you."

*"Not ... this ... time. -cough- Tell ... Ron ... I..."* Jim Potter said nothing more. He simply closed his eyes.

Ginny was weeping uncontrollably. "Harry ... he's stopped breathing. I ... I think he's ..."

Before she could finish, there was a loud *fwoosh* and an explosion of flame nearby. Suddenly, Fawkes was there. The phoenix glided in and landed on Jim's chest. It bent its radiantly plumed head down over the boy's wound, and tears fell from the bird's eyes into the opening. Harry thought he heard a soft sizzle coming from the wound. After a moment, Jim gasped heavily and opened his eyes wide to look around. Within seconds, it was obvious that he was going to be fine.

"Hmmp!" Harry said loudly with an almost bored expression. *"Caaaaalllled It!"*

# The Riddle of the Diary

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 44: The Riddle of the Diary

***9 May 1993***

***8:30 p.m. in the Chamber of Secrets***

Once it was clear that Jim would soon make a full recovery, Harry told Ginny to stay with him while he took care of one final loose end. Then, Harry carefully stepped through the still-open mouth of the Salazar Slytherin statue and into the chamber within. As he did so, the boy's thoughts were churning even beneath the calm exterior provided by his Occlumency. Unlike Tom Riddle, who had completely excised that part of his own psyche responsible for love and empathy, Harry still *had* all of his emotions. They were separated from the part of his mind that would determine a course of action (and could even be shut down completely when necessary in the case of emotional responses that might actually become debilitating), but he definitely still had them. And now that the crisis was over, he would need to spend some time soon meditating on those emotions to determine how he felt about things, and more importantly *why* he felt them.

Item one on the agenda was his cold-blooded decision to use the Notice-Me-Not ring and the Invisibility Cloak just for himself, thereby abandoning his brother to run for his life. Intellectually, it was the right play, a fact borne out not just by Jim's survival but also by his nearly miraculous acquisition of the Sword of Gryffindor. The stratagem also

allowed Harry time to interrogate the shade of Tom Riddle and uncover invaluable information about Voldemort. However, that didn't change the fact that he had essentially betrayed his own brother and then used him as bait for one of the deadliest creatures known to wizard-kind. Jim hadn't called him on it – yet – but Harry realized that he'd acted like the absolute worst caricature of a "Slimy Slytherin."

Item two was more straightforward. When Jim returned with the sword just in time for a climactic final battle with the snake, Harry had been about two seconds away from incinerating Ron Weasley. Intellectually, he still thought it was also the right play. If Tom was to be believed, Ron would be dead within a few minutes regardless and his death would bring about the physical rebirth of Voldemort. However, with Ron dead before that could happen, the diary would have been neutralized as a threat and either Harry or Jim would probably have been able to control the Basilisk with Parseltongue. That said, while Harry might not care for Ron Weasley, the young Gryffindor was still a human being. He was also a member of the Weasley family, most of whom Harry rather liked, and the boy was someone with whom Harry shared several common friends. And unlike Draco, whose petty maliciousness had led Harry to consider extreme measures the year before, Ron was basically an innocent dupe, if a somewhat annoying one. All of which meant that the lingering question of "*Is Harry Potter a potential killer?*" was one that he would need to come to grips with soon.

Item three was perhaps the most vexing. When Jim was dying of basilisk poisoning and Harry's cocky assurance that a bezoar would cure him was revealed as misplaced (and how embarrassing it was for Jim to remember something Snape said that the aspiring Occlumens had forgotten), Harry had shut down his emotional responses.

The idea was that rather than become overwrought by his brother's impending death, he could stay calm and try to give Jim a measure of hope in his last seconds. Again, Harry thought it was the right decision. What made it vexing was that it was even necessary. His brief flashback to the first Potions class had made him suddenly remember the level of animosity between them during their first year. And Harry had considered their relationship to be even worse during their second year, only to realize lately that most of their conflicts had resulted from the combination of Jim's use of a dark Occlumency text and Tom Riddle's various schemes and mindgames. Harry had been shocked at Jim's "deathbed apology," to say nothing of his admission that he'd felt jealous of *Harry* because he feared losing their parents' affection. And now, as a developing Third Level Occlumens, Harry could examine his own emotions and see how much of a role jealousy had played in his own conflicts with Jim. His twin, after all, played no part in Harry being sent to the Dursleys. In fact, since they were twins, it could just as easily have been Harry who became the Boy-Who-Lived out of a freak anomaly and Jim who was sent to live with abusive Muggles. Perhaps it was time for Harry to finally sort out his feelings for Jim Potter and decide whether a fresh start was possible, let alone desirable. Well, with Jim anyway – Harry still thought genuine trust was completely impossible where their parents were concerned.

All of these thoughts whirled through Harry's mind as he entered the portal that opened from the mouth of the Slytherin statue.

"Harry!" Jim called out being him, still somewhat weakly.  
"What are you doing?"

"Back in a second," Harry replied without looking back.  
"Don't worry."

The interior chamber which had housed the Basilisk for untold centuries was a cylindrical room about forty feet across. The floor was stonework save for an ornate metal disk in the center about ten-feet in diameter. It was silver and appeared to be a nest of intertwined snakes of all kinds. On the far side of the room was a life-sized statue of Slytherin (the whole figure this time, not just his head) carved into the wall as a bas-relief. Harry paused long enough to put a minor privacy charm over the entryway so that Jim and Ginny couldn't hear him. Then, he strode over to the bust and addressed it in Parseltongue.

"Speak to me Slytherin, Greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

Harry smiled the seemingly arrogant password, as **Hogwarts: A History** had explained its origins. The Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Founders had demanded significant modifications to the design of the Basilisk before they would approve of its presence at the school. Slytherin acquiesced, but later petulantly added the password to both the entrance to the Chamber and to the false wall where the Ewer was hidden. As a result, future Headmasters regardless of their House would have to verbally acknowledge his genius in order to make use of the Basilisk. Godric Gryffindor had been furious when he found out.

With a soft grinding sound, the section of wall containing the statue rotated around to reveal a small side table. On it rested a fluted crystal pitcher with a copper and silver base depicting badgers and snakes intertwining. There was a bright green liquid inside. Harry carefully removed the Ewer of Hufflepuff and started back before pausing to study the disk in the floor more carefully. He spared a glance back at the entrance to make sure no one was coming. Then, he hissed in the direction of the disk. "Open." The snakes began to move and separate, revealing a four-foot-deep

depression in the floor. Inside was an emerald green egg big enough to hold a toddler ... or a baby basilisk. Harry smiled. Slytherin's Basilisk had the essence of a phoenix incorporated into its making, and while it wouldn't burn up and be instantly reborn, the death of its adult body would inevitably lead to rebirth from a new egg here within this chamber. Harry closed the snake-hatch again, dispelled the privacy charm, and exited the chamber.

Outside, Ginny and Jim were standing over the still unconscious Ron Weasley. Fawkes was perched almost protectively on Jim's shoulder.

"You feel ready to go, Jim?"

"Yeah, surprisingly. Phoenix tears are good stuff. I'm not even sore from all the falling and fighting I did."

"Good." Harry turned his attention to the phoenix. "Fawkes? I don't know if you can understand me, but this container holds a potion that can cure the Headmaster of his petrification. Also, Ron here probably needs to see the nurse as soon as possible. Can you transport us to the infirmary?"

The bird cawed loudly and then spread its magnificent plumage. Flames shot out of the tips of the bird's wings and then wrapped around the four students to envelop them. There was a brilliant flash, and then the Chamber of Secrets was empty.

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An instant later, the flames cleared, and as Harry had hoped, they were now in the middle of the Infirmary, much to the surprise of those present who were not petrified: Madam Pomfrey, James Potter, Rufus Scrimgeour, and the

majority of the Weasley family who were all crowded around George's bed.

"Jim! Harry!" James exclaimed. He rushed forward to embrace both boys. Jim hugged his father back, while Harry was a bit more perfunctory, but neither rejected their father despite his recent shortcomings. Most of the Weasleys crowded around Ginny first and then Ron after Arthur carefully levitated the unconscious boy into a bed next to George's.

"So I take it reopening the investigation into Myrtle's death worked?" Harry asked. James grimaced uncomfortably, but it was Scrimgeour who spoke.

"Your suggestion was ingenious, Mr. Potter, but your father would not have been able to process the paperwork to reopen the investigation before tomorrow morning. Fortunately, someone else was on hand to provide a faster and equally ingenious way to circumvent the school's wards."

"Who?" asked Jim curiously.

"Lucius Malfoy! When the Minister advised him of the situation, Lucius exercised his authority as Chairman of the Board of Governors to arrange an '*impromptu careers fair*' tonight at the school, and he invited a cross section of Ministry personnel here ostensibly to speak on the topic of job opportunities within our government. Among them are a dozen aurors and three Unspeakables who are taking the opportunity to restore order and begin an investigation while Ludo Bagman regales the students in the Great Hall with stories of his Quidditch days. That should kill another hour or so, after which various other functionaries will speak about what their departments do. In the meantime,

the aurors are prepping for a complete evacuation of the school and an elite squad of hit wizards are getting ready to descend into the Chamber of Secrets. Of course, that expedition is obviously rendered moot by your own sudden arrival. *So*, as impressive as your appearance is, Mr. Potter, and as moving as these family reunions are, will *someone please explain what's been going on?*"

"I'd be happy to, Chief Auror," said Harry respectfully. "But first, might I suggest that we begin the process of reviving the petrified victims?" He held up the Ewer. "This is the Ewer of Hufflepuff, created simultaneously with Slytherin's Basilisk. According to **Hogwarts: A History**, it will produce one full dose of the Restoration Potion every seventeen minutes. If you revive the Headmaster first, I assume evacuation will no longer be necessary.

Pomfrey gingerly took the Ewer and carried it off to study it and make sure it worked as advertised.

"You're sure about that, Harry?" asked James Potter. Harry nodded confidently. "But what about the Basilisk?"

"Dead," said Harry flatly. "Jim killed it, and may I say with extraordinary skill and courage. *Plus*, he even used the Sword of Gryffindor to do it, which I should hope will kill all this Heir of Slytherin nonsense."

With that, Jim held up the sword and handed it gingerly to his father. "Careful, Dad. It's coated with Basilisk venom, so it will kill pretty much anything it cuts unless you're lucky enough to have a phoenix on hand that likes you." Fawkes, who was still perched on Jim's shoulder, cawed his agreement.

James looked back and forth between his two sons and the sword in amazement, before finally dropping the sword and



pulling first Jim and then Harry once more into a tight embrace. Jim became misty-eyed while Harry was distinctly uncomfortable but determined not to show it. Meanwhile, Ginny was busy telling her family the basics about Ron – that he had come into possession of a dark artifact that had been manipulating his emotions all year long before eventually possessing him outright and using his body to petrify everyone. She was surprisingly firm in telling her family members that it was not Ron's fault and that they should *all* be supportive when he woke up, particularly since, but for a stroke of luck, it might have been *her* that was tricked and possessed by the spirit of the diary. In particular, she gave Fred a *look* that he found mildly threatening.

The Headmaster had been placed into a private room into which the three Potters and Scrimgeour were now crowded. Having confirmed its properties, Madam Pomfrey fed the potion to Professor Dumbledore, and after a few seconds he blinked and then sat bolt upright in his bed, his wand suddenly appearing in his hand as he looked around wildly.

"Where is Ronald Weasley?" were his first words after revival. Harry took a step forward.

"He's here in the infirmary, unconscious." Harry hesitated. "He was possessed, but ... the one who possessed him has been removed and dealt with."

Dumbledore blinked as he absorbed that. "How long have I been petrified?"

"Less than forty-eight hours," said Scrimgeour. "What do you remember, Albus?"

The old man collected himself and took a sip of water from a glass on his bedside table. Fawkes jumped from Jim's shoulder to the top of the headboard behind him. Madam Pomfrey completed her diagnosis before Scrimgeour shooed her out, much to the Matron's annoyance. Dumbledore began to speak.

"I remember encountering young Mr. Weasley who obviously showed signs of possession by," Dumbledore hesitated, "well, by a dark spirit, one I believe I recognized. Before I could act, there was a movement from behind me and then ... well, as the saying goes, I just remember big yellow eyes."

"Ron was possessed by Tom Riddle, sir," said Jim. "Better know to all of us as ... *Voldemort*." A silence descended over the room.

"Tom Riddle ... was ... Voldemort?!" Dumbledore said in evident shock. The reaction of the two aurors was one of surprise, but that was nothing compared to Dumbledore who nearly swooned before putting his head down into his hands for several seconds.

"Albus?" James stepped forward, alarmed at the old man's reaction. Dumbledore put his hand up to forestall any questions. Finally, he lifted his head, though his expression shaken.

"Forgive me, my friends. I was suddenly overcome by the effects of having to reassimilate several *years* worth of memories that had been altered in some fashion. It was ... unpleasant. Now tell me, Jim, Harry - how did you learn all of this?"

Jim shrugged. "He just sort of ... told us. You-Know-Who's a bit a gloater." As he spoke, Harry fished the remains of the

Diary out of Ron's bag and handed it to the Headmaster.

"This Diary once belonged to Tom Marvolo Riddle when he was a student, and the name on the cover is also an anagram for *I Am Lord Voldemort*. Sir, given the timing involved between Riddle's disappearance and Voldemort's first appearance ... well, no offense, but how did no one figure this out?"

"A provocative question, indeed, my boy." Dumbledore took the book from Harry and examined it for a few minutes before waving his wand over it in an extremely intricate pattern while muttering some obscure incantations. After a few seconds, a highly elaborate rune sequence appeared over the Diary.

"Oh, oh my word ... what a brilliant mind!" Then, the man suddenly looked saddened. "And what a tragedy that such a brilliant mind should be turned to such evil." Dumbledore looked over and gestured for Scrimgeour to step forward and examine the runes. "Here, Rufus, do you see?"

The Chief Auror hobbled over and pulled out a set of brass spectacles before examining the runes that had so excited Dumbledore. "Is ... is that a *Fidelius*?"

"I thought a Fidelius just conceals locations," said Jim. "Homes and hiding places. That sort of thing."

Dumbledore shook his head. "The Fidelius can theoretically conceal secrets of a less tangible nature, but only in the most exceptionally skilled hands." He looked over at the Potter twins. "But before we make any further inquiries, I must ask you both to tell us everything that has happened to you today."

And without preamble, they did. Jim's account was fairly straightforward, while Harry's omitted a few details. If Dumbledore noticed any inconsistencies, he did not inquire after them.

"One final question. Harry, you spent the most time with the manifestation of Tom Riddle who claimed to be Voldemort. What were your impressions of him?"

Harry thought about that for a moment. "Surprisingly, a bit of a let down. He was very emotional and impulsive. He had multiple chances to kill Jim and me both, but he was more interested in showing off his Basilisk when he could have just finished us off with a wand. He ..." Harry hesitated. "From what he said, I gathered that he had put bits of his soul into the Diary and other objects and that's what was keeping him from fully dying." Dumbledore and Scrimgeour both went pale at that suggestion. "Anyway," Harry continued, "I sort of had the theory that the Diary was the first such object, and that he'd deliberately made it less ... Voldemortish, I suppose, because he was still experimenting with the process."

Dumbledore nodded. "I believe you're partially correct, Harry. Voldemort did place a fragment of his soul inside this book, using the most foul and despicable of arts and a spell whose name I will not repeat. Then, using forbidden soul magics, he crafted a personality for it. One based on his own and which actually believed that it *was* a manifestation of Tom Riddle but which differed from the true Voldemort just enough to suit his needs."

"What needs?" asked James in confusion.

"I'm surprised you don't recall, James, having once been under a Fidelius yourself. It is a fundamental limitation of

the spell that *you cannot be the Keeper of your own Secret*, or else you or Lily could have served as the Secret Keeper for Godric's Hollow instead of Sirius Black, and much unhappiness could have been avoided." Dumbledore waved his wand again, and the floating runes changed. "The specific secret protected by this Fidelius is '*Tom Marvolo Riddle is the dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort*.' Clearly, he decided at some point to become the leader of a Pureblood supremacist movement despite his own blood status which lay somewhere between Muggleborn and Halfblood, depending on how one considered the question. So who else could he have possibly trusted with knowledge of his deception when his most trusted followers were the ones most likely to turn against him if they knew the truth?"

"Another version of himself!" Harry exclaimed. "An artificial personality that believed that it was him but that was so different in character that it could be considered a separate person for purposes of the Fidelius spell!"

"Well stated, Harry. From what you told me, Harry, the Riddle of the Diary spoke disparagingly of his Muggle father but was protective of the memory of his mother. My recollection, however, is that Tom had refused for many years to believe that his wizarding heritage could come from his mother who he despised for, in his mind, being so weak as to have died in childbirth. And whatever his feelings about his birth father, he continued to use the name Riddle even after his school days even though he was legally entitled to assume the name Gaunt and possibly profit from the family's former social standing."

Scrimgeour frowned. "So this Riddle chap, after he graduates, reinvents himself as Lord Voldemort and persuades a bunch of rich Pureblood bigots that he's the next big thing? How does that work?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "I'm sure he made quite an impression. Tom was indubitably brilliant and charismatic. His Parseltongue gift would have been powerful evidence that he was a descendant of Salazar Slytherin. And yet, the Fidelius would have thwarted any attempts to find out his true origins, which would only have added to Voldemort's mystique."

"Yeah, but the Fidelius is destroyed now, right?" said Jim. "So should we call a press conference and announce to the whole world that You-Know-Who isn't as Pureblooded as he claimed?"

"As tempting as it is to shout the truth from every rooftop in Diagon Alley, I recommend we be circumspect for now," Scrimgeour said thoughtfully. "You know, I'm suddenly reminded of one of Alastor Moody's crazier conspiracy theories. Towards the end of the war, he was convinced that Voldemort's motives were more complicated than merely taking over the country and running it as a blood purist dictatorship. The Death Eater attacks that targeted Muggleborns and Muggles were generally haphazard and seemingly random terrorist attacks. But when he went after influential Purebloods who the Death Eaters considered blood traitors, he was remarkably precise. Is it possible that after all that time, poor put-upon Tom Riddle was still trying to get revenge on the Purebloods for how they treated him as a schoolboy?"

"I suppose that *would* explain why he was so happy to use the Cruciatus against his Pureblood followers left, right, and center," James said. "In which case, revealing the truth now, when the peace is still somewhat fragile, might actually cause people to turn against Muggleborns if they knew that Voldemort actually was one himself and was just manipulating Purebloods into wiping each other out."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore distractedly. "I must confess, I am still reeling over the implications of Tom's use of the Fidelius in the manner we've seen. You may recall, Harry, a conversation we had in which I mentioned turning Tom down for the DADA position in 1953 but not being able to remember why?" The boy nodded. "Well, I certainly remember now! Since Tom had left Hogwarts, all sorts of rumors had been swirling about the young man, the company he kept, and the sorts of magic he'd been pursuing. Between 1945 and 1953, he had been considered a potential suspect in no less than *three* murders, though nothing was ever proven."

"Was one of them Nobby Leech?" Harry asked to Dumbledore's surprise.

"No, actually. Leech's death was always believed to have been a sudden illness. Do you know have reason to suspect otherwise?"

Harry nodded and explained what they had learned about the 1943 Muggleborn conspiracy to embarrass the school's Slytherins with carefully arranged attacks on Muggleborn conspirators. "And it just so happens that the petrified Muggleborns who were part of the conspiracy all ended up dead before 1960."

"Interesting," James nodded. "I'll look into it. See if there's any evidence of foul play in those deaths."

Suddenly, Jim spoke up excitedly. "Headmaster, I got to see a memory of you and Tom together on the night Myrtle was killed. It seemed like you were suspicious of him even then."

Dumbledore nodded. "There had always been something about Tom Riddle that had always troubled me for reasons I could never fully articulate. But I *remember* that night, now

that the Fidelius is broken. And I *also remember* being nearly certain that Tom had something to do with the girl's death, even more so when he put forth poor Hagrid as the culprit."

"But the Fidelius made you forget that?" Harry asked incredulously. "You talked about Tom in glowing terms when we discussed him earlier."

"Yes, I did indeed. Consider, Harry, the precise words of the secret contained in the Fidelius. '*Tom Marvolo Riddle is **the dark wizard** known as Lord Voldemort.*' The secret kept was not only the connection between Tom and Voldemort but the fact that Tom was a dark wizard at all. The result was that every single thing I had ever observed that made me deeply suspicious of his character was occluded from my memory. Me, a seventh-level Occlumens, and with a single spell, Voldemort altered *years* of my memories! And not just mine, but those of everyone who knew him during his school days!"

Harry stiffened slightly at how the Headmaster had framed the issue. He recalled his own recent experience with a spell that could affect the memories of the whole world – one so powerful and dangerous that Professor Lockhart had warned him never to speak its name aloud where anyone from the Ministry might hear.

"It's not your fault, Albus," said Scrimgeour. "The Fidelius is an incredibly powerful spell. More than a few wizards have argued that it should be proscribed."

"Intellectually, I realize that, Rufus, but it's still a sobering thought. You know, an advanced study of memory charms was one of dear Gilderoy's special projects this year. I think



it might behoove me to spend some time going over that team's findings."

Before Dumbledore could expand on that, they were all distracted by a commotion out in the main part of the infirmary, one that included the unmistakable sound of a boy screaming.

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It seemed like an eternity that Ron Weasley had spent trapped in his own memories and nightmares. He remembered being in Percy's study room with the Other Ron. He remembered the absolute naked horror of wave after wave of spiders crawling up his throat and out of his mouth and nose. He remembered (to his shame) how he broke down and surrendered to the Other Ron, and then things going black. He even remembered the despair he felt when he realized he had surrendered for nothing. When he came out of his stupor, he was wrapped in pitch darkness and lying horizontally in a narrow wooden box. He only narrowly fought off the urge to panic when he realized it was a coffin, and again when the smell of dank musty earth told him that he'd been buried alive. Despite his mounting terror, he didn't lose control until the first spider crawled up over his forehead.

Ron Weasley *really* hated spiders.

Mercifully, they never came from *inside* him like they had before and there didn't seem to be as many of them. But still the spiders came with their wriggling hairy legs crawling all over him, inside his clothes and all over his body. At first, he blubbered incoherently, but after some unknowable span of time, his cries became more focused. Specifically, he screamed out Jim's name and called out for the Boy-Who-Lived to save him. Time passed, and no rescue

came, but despite that, Ron's cries died down into a whispered mantra that he recited over and over: *Jim will save me.*

At some point, over the soft sound of his own whispered plea (*Jim will save me. Jim will save me.*) Ron became aware of other sounds. Angry taunts in his voice but using someone else's words. A terrible awful hissing sound. And then, something inexplicable yet wonderful. Ron could *feel* that Tom Riddle was suddenly afraid for his own life (or whatever passed for life for him). Which was also *Ron's* life, but at that point, Ron would have been happy to die if it meant the monster from the Diary would die with him. But Ron didn't die. Instead, he suddenly heard Tom *screaming* with Ron's voice, a sound that was music to the boy's ears. And then, everything went black again.

Time passed until, suddenly, there was a brilliant light from overhead. Ron found himself lying in a hospital bed in the school's infirmary. Surrounding him were most of the members of his family. Arthur, who he'd thought had considered him just "one of the spares." George, who he'd tried to get expelled. Fred, who he *did* get expelled. Percy, who he was pretty sure he'd physically attacked during one of his most recent blackouts. Ginny, who he'd referred to as "Daddy's Little Death Eater." And Molly, who had sent the Howler that had convinced him that she would never love him as much as Ginny.

Ron screamed again.

Immediately, the boy started thrashing in his bed and batting at his clothing, convinced that he was still in a nightmare and so there must still be spiders on him somewhere. Alarmed, his brothers tried to hold him down while Madam Pomfrey practically forced a Calming Draught

down his throat. And then a second one and a third. Soon after, the boy stopped screaming but continued weeping piteously as he deliriously mumbled his pleas for forgiveness from his family, from Jim, and from everyone else around, including the petrification victims. By that point, the Potters, Scrimgeour, and Dumbledore had joined the group, and Jim was with the Weasleys (all their prior animosities forgotten for the moment) as he tried to reassure Ron that he wasn't responsible for the petrifications or anything else that had happened. Then, a loud cough followed by an icy voice intruded into their efforts. Two new figures had entered the infirmary: Minister Cornelius Fudge ... and Lucius Malfoy, who glared hatefully at the entire Weasley family.

"Forgive me, Mr. Potter," he said in a voice like silk dipped in poison. "But would you mind repeating that? It rather sounded as though you said the Weasley boy played some role in *the petrification of my son and heir!*"

"Er, yes," said Fudge nervously. "I think I would like to know what's going on as well. Albus?"

"Your son will be revived within a few hours, Lucius," Dumbledore said. "As my own mobility attests, we now have access to as much Restoration Potion as we need thanks to the resourcefulness of Jim and Harry Potter. As for the details, perhaps it would be best if continued this discussion in the more comfortable confines of my office."

"We will *continue* only after my immediate question has been answered, Dumbledore. Was the Weasley boy the one responsible for the petrification of my son?" The look on Malfoy's face, while still a perfect mask of emotional control, nevertheless promised bloody vengeance against the entire Weasley family if that question was answered

affirmatively. Everyone in the room tensed in response, and the Weasleys gathered protectively around Ron. Percy actually cast a nonverbal *Silencio* on the boy for fear he might blurt out a confession.

During all this, Harry, who was standing just behind Dumbledore, studied Lucius Malfoy carefully and even dilated slightly so that he could review everything he knew about the man's possible connections to the events of the past year. He suspected from their last conversation that Lucius knew *something* about Tom Riddle. It was unlikely (in light of the *Fidelius*) that he actually knew that Riddle and Voldemort were the same person, but the name definitely meant something to him. Then, Harry's mental review suddenly pulled up another oddity – that bizarre incident from the previous summer when Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley got into a public brawl in front of Flourish and Blotts.

And then, as if looking through a kaleidoscope that had suddenly come into focus, Harry *understood*. He took a step forward and gently tugged on Dumbledore's sleeve. The Headmaster looked down at him in surprise, and that surprise only grew when Harry looked him squarely in the eyes, dropped *all* of his Occlumency defenses, and thought as clearly as he could "*Please, let me handle this.*" Dumbledore's face remained impassive, but on the other side of him, Scrimgeour suddenly turned to look towards Harry and then tilted his head slightly. Then, Dumbledore turned back towards Lucius with a genial expression.

"I would be happy to answer your question, Lucius, but I believe young Mr. Potter here can satisfy your curiosity more thoroughly than I."

"Albus?" James started in surprise at the thought of his son in a dialogue with a former Death Eater like Malfoy. But before he could say anything more, Scrimgeour put a firm hand on his shoulder. Harry stepped forward.

"Go on, Mr. Potter," Lucius drawled expectantly.

"Well, Mr. Malfoy, Ron was *technically* responsible, but at the time, he was under the mental control of a magical diary that had been first been given to Ginny Weasley without her knowledge before it was passed on to Ron. The diary originally belonged to a former student named Tom Marvolo Riddle. Perhaps you recall me mentioning Riddle to you when we spoke last week after Draco was petrified."

"I ... recall the conversation," Lucius said. There was the slightest narrowing of his eyes, accompanied by an almost imperceptible tightening of his lips. Harry noticed, as did at least two others.

"As I suspected then, it turns out Tom Riddle was the original Heir of Slytherin responsible for the petrification attacks of 1943. He must of have written how he did it in his diary ... which later passed into the hands of *You-Know-Who!*"

Fudge gasped audibly at that, but Harry was more focused on the tiny movement of Lucius's Adam's apple and the way his hand tightened around the grip of his cane (which obviously housed a hold-out wand).

"You-Know-Who cursed the diary and converted it into a powerful dark object with the ability to influence and even possess anyone who wrote in it for too long. So while Ron played an unwilling role, Lord Malfoy, if you want to blame someone for your son's petrification, I suggest you look to the person who gave Ginny the diary in the first place.

Luckily, I know when and where that happened, as well as who the real villain was!"

With that, Harry smiled at Malfoy. He tried not to appear smug, but it was a losing battle. For his part, Lucius's eyes narrowed even more, and his grip on his cane grew even tighter.

"You do?!" Jim exclaimed in surprise.

"Of course," Harry replied, glancing over at his brother and the Weasleys. "The diary was slipped into Ginny's cauldron last August when we were all getting our books at Flourish & Blotts." He turned back towards Lucius. "I'm sure you remember that afternoon, Lord Malfoy. That was the day you got into that altercation with Mr. Weasley here that turned into a fistfight."

"I remember the incident," Malfoy said coldly.

"As do I," Arthur Weasley added in an equally harsh voice.

"Well, that's all well and good, Mr. Potter," said Minister Fudge. "But *who* was the one responsible for giving this cursed book to Miss Weasley?"

Harry looked at the Minister in feigned surprise. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought that was obvious. It was *Gilderoy Lockhart!*" With that announcement, Harry actually had to clamp down hard on his own emotions to avoid snickering at the look of visible surprise, relief, and confusion that played across Malfoy's face for almost a full second before he regained control of himself. Nearby, Scrimgeour glanced sharply at Harry before turning back to study Lucius impassively, even as Dumbledore's eyes twinkled madly.

"It was Lockhart?" George Weasley asked, with just a hint of sadness in his voice.

"Obviously," said Harry. "I mean, he *did confess* to being responsible for the petrifications. If you recall, Mrs. Weasley, he made a big show of giving you a free set of all his books at the book-signing. The diary was relatively small, and it would have been no trouble to slip it in among all the other books. And since you'd mentioned that you had five children, he'd have guessed that at least *one* of them would find the diary and make use of it."

Molly was livid. "That ... *fiend* used *me* to pass a cursed objection on to my own children! Arthur! Take me to St. Mungo's *this instant*! I'll show him what '*long term spell damage*' feels like!"

"Now, now, Mollywobbles," Arthur said gently.

"But ... what was the *point* of all this?" Fudge asked in confusion.

"Well, I'm not *entirely* sure," Harry said respectfully, "since Jim managed to save Ron before the plan was completed, but since the diary caused Ron to petrify the whole staff, my guess is that it was a weapon that You-Know-Who created prior to getting destroyed by the Boy-Who-Lived. His original plan was probably to smuggle the diary into Hogwarts so that it could possess a student who would then petrify the Headmaster and the rest of the staff as prelude to an attack on the school or something like that. But then, You-Know-Who was destroyed, and the diary was left just sitting on a shelf somewhere until Lockhart or someone else foolishly activated it."

Malfoy sneered slightly at that, and Harry moved on swiftly.

"Lord Malfoy," he said as earnestly as possible for a Slytherin, "Ron was just a victim in this. A victim of You-Know-Who's cruel powers of mind control. Just as *you* were a victim of his Imperius Curse all those years ago and were forced to do things for which *you yourself* were nearly sent to *Azkaban*."

Behind Harry, Scrimgeour also fought the urge to smile as the boy continued.

"Honestly, it seems to me that House Malfoy and House Weasley have a *mutual enemy* here. If you'll forgive my bluntness, maybe this is a sign that your two houses should set aside their differences and end the Oath of Enmity that has kept your families in conflict for these last few centuries."

Lucius raised his chin haughtily. "My son wrote home to ask me about your discovery of the Enmity Oath between the House of Malfoy and the House of Weasley. I have reviewed our family history and confirmed his inquiry."

"I, er, already knew about the Enmity Oath," Arthur said quietly. "It's ... not something we tell our children about until they're grown, but all the adult Weasleys know about it."

The two men who had been enemies for their whole lives stared balefully at one another. Finally, Malfoy spoke.

"I suppose two centuries is long enough to hold a grudge over a petty marital dispute. *However*, the declaration of enmity was initially made by the House of Weasley. Is the Head of House Weasley willing to be the first to declare our feud at an end?"



Arthur stared in astonishment at Lucius. "I ... am indeed so willing," he stammered. After a few seconds, the two men walked stiffly towards one another and then, after a brief hesitation, shook hands. Immediately, everyone in the room felt a wave of ... something. The impression was as if somewhere far away a mighty glacier had finally cracked and begun to quickly melt. Arthur and Lucius both exhaled, but Malfoy spoke first.

"Do not think, however, Weasley, that this changes my views on the Muggle Protection Act. I still have legitimate concerns about the Act's breadth." Then, he hesitated for a moment. "That said, I am not averse to meeting with you later to see if some compromise is possible."

"I ... would be very appreciative," Arthur said weakly.

Lucius nodded and then turned back to Dumbledore. "How long until my son is revived, Dumbledore?"

"No more than a few hours, Lucius. I'll send word as soon as we're ready to give him the potion."

"Very well. With your permission, I shall escort the Minister to the nearest Floo. I suppose I should send word to my wife as well." He bowed to the group and then turned towards the doors. Fudge followed before stopping and turning back towards the aurores.

"Oh, Scrimgeour? Potter? I'd like to meet with you both tomorrow morning at nine o'clock in my office? I'm glad to see that things are resolved here, but I do have some questions I want answered." The two men nodded their assent, and Fudge quickly followed after Malfoy.

After a few seconds, Fred Weasley finally spoke first. "So does this mean we have to be nice to Draco Malfoy?" he

asked.

"No," Harry said while exhaling loudly now that the tension had been broken. "It just means you don't *have* to hate him."

James moved closer to Harry and Dumbledore. "So what was all that about? Putting Harry in charge of explaining things to Malfoy?"

"It was because I knew he would do so admirably, James. One thing I've learned over the years is that sometimes it takes a Slytherin to handle a Slytherin." Then, Dumbledore moved closer and spoke softly so that none of the Weasley family could hear. "There was a very real possibility that Lucius could have pursued criminal sanctions against Ronald Weasley. Perhaps even Azkaban, depending on how the Wizengamot chose to treat a minor who committed crimes while claiming to be possessed. Your son not only diverted Lucius from pursuing such an option, he actually persuaded Lucius to abandon the Enmity Oath that has kept those two houses at odds for centuries."

James looked down at Harry with a curious expression that seemed to mix pride, confusion, and concern in equal measures. Harry thought about it for a few seconds and then he realized – James was reacting to Dumbledore saying "it takes a Slytherin to handle a Slytherin." The man had finally started coming round to Harry merely being in the House of the Snakes ... and now Dumbledore was suggesting that he was a Slytherin on par with Lucius Malfoy himself. Harry frowned but tried not to show any disappointment in his father's reaction.

"Yes, indeed," said Scrimgeour, "most impressive. However, since we're expected to report on everything that's

happened tomorrow morning. I'd like to interview the boys more formally. Why don't you get a full written statement from Jim? I'll do the same with Harry. Albus, is your office free?"

And without another word to James Potter, the Chief Auror herded Harry out of the infirmary, with Dumbledore following close behind. Minutes later, they were ensconced in the Headmaster's office. Scrimgeour sat down in a chair, pointed his wand at a nearby table, and summoned a large bottle of fire whiskey and a single glass, presumably from his home or office. He poured himself a stiff glass, ignoring Dumbledore's disapproving expression as he did. After taking a sip and exhaling, he turned his attention to Harry.

"Right, now let me see if I have a clear understanding of the situation in case there are any holes I'll need you to fill in. Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater and a member of Voldemort's Inner Circle who escaped prosecution only because Sirius Black claimed at trial to have put him under the Imperius. At some point, Voldemort put a part of his soul into his old school diary to use as a spiritual anchor in the event of his death. He gave the diary to Malfoy who kept it hidden away for over ten years before picking a fight with Arthur Weasley that he used as cover for slipping the diary into the Weasley girl's school supplies. And *you* have just helped him to get away with it all with the connivance of Albus here ... and I suppose myself, since I didn't speak up either. Is that about the size of it?"

Harry gaped at the Chief Auror.

"Honestly, lad," Scrimgeour said. "Lucius Malfoy is at best a fourth level Occlumens and you have not yet mastered level three. The truth was practically written on both your faces

for anyone with the wit to see it. By which I mean myself and Albus and no one else in the room."

Shocked at the Chief Auror's deductions, Harry turned to the Headmaster, who merely smiled at him with twinkling eyes. The boy turned back to Scrimgeour and shrugged.

"*Could* you have gotten a conviction under these facts? I mean, I suppose with pensieve reconstructions you could show Malfoy put the diary into Ginny's cauldron, but even then, the diary obviously had powerful mind-controlling properties, and Mr. Malfoy has already successfully used an Imperius defense once. At least this way, we got Ron out of trouble, we got the Malfoy-Weasley feud resolved which will be good for Ginny Weasley in Slytherin House, and with luck this might even move Malfoy into a more publically anti-Voldemort stance."

Scrimgeour put up his hand. "I wasn't condemning you, lad. Just making sure I hadn't missed anything. I do give you credit for spinning a mostly credible silk purse out of that particular sow's ear. Now, let's go over your statement again for my report to our illustrious Minister for Magic."

Harry spent about ten minutes answering questions from the two men, at the end of which Dumbledore asked if he could have a pensieve extract of Harry's experiences.

Harry swallowed. "If it's all the same, sir. I would prefer not to produce a memory of the entire experience. There were a few moments down there that, well, I'd rather not to see preserved in memory form."

Dumbledore looked at him expectantly. Harry took a deep breath.

"First ... before Jim showed up with the Sword of Gryffindor ... I thought I might have to ... to kill Ron in order to stop Voldemort from returning."

Dumbledore looked at him gravely. "I understand how that fear might have caused you to say things that you might now find embarrassing, Harry. I promise we won't hold it against you."

"Let me clarify that, sir. It wasn't anything I *said*." Harry sighed, suddenly tired from the long day's events. "Before Jim showed up ... I was going to kill Ron. I had my wand in his face and the word Incendio on my lips. I was going to burn him up. And I'd really rather not have any evidence lying around that shows how close I came."

The two men remained silent for several seconds. Finally, Scrimgeour spoke softly.

"It is a hard thing, I know, Mr. Potter to face the burden of doing what must be done, especially for someone as young as yourself. I am not surprised that you feel ambivalent about what almost happened. But I will encourage you to take comfort in the fact that on this occasion you were spared from having to do what was necessary for the Greater Good."

At those last words, Dumbledore made a sound that was not quite a grumble. Harry looked up at him, wondering if the Headmaster was disappointed in him, but his expression suggested he was more unhappy with Scrimgeour.

"I would not have put it *quite* like that, Harry," he said. "To be perfectly honest, I have long thought that "*for the Greater Good*" were the four most dangerous words in the English language, as there is almost no crime they cannot excuse when used by one who believes his cause is just. I

will only say that I am relieved that Jim arrived in time, not just for Ronald's sake but for your own."

"My own, sir?" Harry asked.

"For one wizard to take the life of another causes fundamental changes in the soul, Mr. Potter," he said. "Even when doing so is necessary and unavoidable."

"That doesn't change the fact that sometime such killings are necessary for the public good," Scrimgeour interrupted. "During the last war, the Wizengamot gave special dispensation for aurors to use the Killing Curse, and I am not ashamed to say that I did so on occasion when my life or the lives of others depended on it. But I cannot deny that doing so affected me, and not just psychologically. Something *happens* to wizards who kill. It's part of the reason that spells which require the sacrifice of a human life to cast are so heavily proscribed by our government. The Horcrux Ritual, the spell that Voldemort used to place a soul fragment within his diary and which Albus here was too squeamish to name, is such a spell."

"Rufus!" Dumbledore snapped irritably. "We do not name forbidden spells from the Anathema Codex in the presence of twelve-year-old children!"

"Oh, of course not. Silly me." Scrimgeour's tone made it clear that he was not even the least bit chastened. "Forget I used the word *horcrux*, Mr. Potter. It'll only get you into trouble."

Dumbledore sighed and shook his head. "*Anyway*, Mr. Potter, I am pleased for all our sake that you were able to avoid resorting to lethal measures in dealing with Mr. Weasley, and I hope that circumstances will continue to favor you in avoiding such measures in the future. Now, was

that the only issue you wished to avoid producing as a memory?"

Harry took a second, deeper breath. "No sir. The Basilisk is still alive."

Immediately, there was an uproar from both men, both of whom seemed inclined to head back to the Chamber of Secrets right that second. The boy put up his hands to regain their attention.

"Alive, but *dormant*," he said. "Salazar Slytherin somehow incorporated the essence of a phoenix into the Basilisk's creation process. When it dies, it's immediately reborn into an egg that's concealed inside the giant statue of Slytherin's head until it's needed again. I'm ... not sure if it's even possible to permanently kill it, but in any case, it's no longer a threat to the school and never will be again if we can get rid of Voldemort permanently. Or at the very least find where he's hiding the Diadem of Ravenclaw, which is what allows him complete control over the creature."

The two men finally calmed down. "The Diadem of Ravenclaw?" Dumbledore said. "That's been missing for nearly a thousand years. I believe there were rumors that it was being held in the possession of a minor wizarding family from Eastern Europe. Albania, I think..." At that, Dumbledore froze with his mouth still open. His eyes widened in surprise.

"What?" Scrimgeour asked.

"I just remembered. Quirinus Quirrell had been on a sabbatical to Albania to research vampires the summer before his turn as DADA instructor."

Rufus nodded. "So that's where You-Know-Who got to him. And by the way, I'm still angry at being kept out of the loop last year, Albus."

"Yes, I know. You can yell at me about it some more later. Harry, I assume that you do not wish this information to be recorded because you fear being blamed if knowledge of the Basilisk's survival got out?" Harry nodded. "Very well. Let us compromise. Go back to your dormitory and get some rest tonight. Tomorrow, I will allow you private access to my pensieve, and you can extract the relevant memories in smaller segments, excluding anything you feel reflects negatively on you. Is that satisfactory?"

Harry smiled. "Yes sir! Thank you sir!"

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Minutes later, Harry had completed his interview with the two men and been dismissed from the Headmaster's office. After he was gone, Rufus took another sip of his fire whiskey.

"He's a remarkable young man, isn't he, Albus?"

"That he is, Rufus. That he is. As remarkable in his own way as the Boy-Who-Lived."

"And so frightfully intelligent as well."

Dumbledore hesitated. "I don't know that I'd say *frightfully* intelligent. Though his intellect is prodigious for a child of his years. Even more so than I'd realized at first."

"He's also hiding something. Some secrets that would be revealed by his memories of the Chamber of Secrets *other than* the two that he willingly revealed."



"I agree, but I think he's earned a measure of trust, and so I'm not inclined to press the matter for the time being."

"Mmm," Scrimgeour nodded and then took another sip of whiskey. "So tell me this at least – do you think the boy has any idea that he's a natural Legilimens?"

Dumbledore coughed delicately. "I very much doubt it. I'll speak to Severus about it once he's revived and had a chance to recover."

Scrimgeour nodded again but said nothing more.

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Once outside the entrance to the Headmaster's office, Harry exhaled loudly in relief at having gotten out of providing a pensieve memory in front of the two men. While the two secrets he'd revealed were somewhat embarrassing, they were nothing compared to his conversation with Tom Riddle in which they'd discussed him being a Parselmouth *and* a claimant for the title of Prince of Slytherin. Once Blaise and Theo were revived, he'd get with them in the Lair and review his memories in his own pensieve first. Together, they'd figure out the best way to edit the memories so that none of Harry's important secrets were revealed.

Harry checked his watch. Amazingly in light of how much had happened today, it was only just past 9:00. He assumed that the Ewer would first be used to revive teachers, then prefects, and finally students, so it would likely be several more hours before his friends were revived. He considered his options for several minutes, and then decided to live dangerously. He darted down the corridor and into an empty classroom. The boy was still carrying Ron's book-bag over his shoulder, and from it he removed the blank

parchment which he assumed was the Twins' mysterious map. Opening it up, he looked around to make sure he was alone and then whispered "*I solemnly swear I'm up to no good.*"

His eyes widened as the blank parchment filled itself with a detailed map of the entire school, complete with tiny dots moving about and labeled with the names of the students. He also noted that the map included the Slytherin dungeon but *not* the Prince's Lair, nor did it indicate the presence of the Chamber of Secrets. However, after few seconds of searching, he did notice one interesting name loitering in the Trophy Room.

"*Hmm. I've talked to him twice so far and survived the experience. Dare I go three-for-three?*" Harry smiled. Then, he looked back down at the map.

"Okay, I know the password to activate this thing," he muttered to himself, "but how do I turn you off?" Then, to Harry's further surprise, part of the map faded away to be replaced by writing.

***Mr. Padfoot is curious as to how someone might know  
one password but not the other.***

***Has our dear friend Snivellus finally developed more  
than one working brain cell?***

"Snivellus," Harry said softly. "You mean Professor Snape?"

*Mr. Prongs expresses shock and dismay at the incredible  
decline in the quality  
of education offered at Hogwarts if someone like Snivellus  
is now on the faculty.  
His hair alone should be disqualifying!*

Harry thought quickly. He knew all too well that "Snivellus" was James Potter's offensive nickname for Snape. He knew also that James had three close friends – Peter Pettigrew, Remus Lupin, and Sirius Black – who collectively had called themselves the Marauders. Had they made this map originally? And how in Merlin's name did it fall into the hands of the Weasley Twins years after the four had graduated? Harry smiled speculatively.

"Well, I wouldn't know about that. I'm just a lowly Second Year. My name's Harry Potter."

***Mr. Prongs wishes to inquire as to whether you're related to James Potter, a dashing roguish lad-about-town.***

"He's ... he's my dad." Harry felt slightly queasy about using "the D-word" under these circumstances, but he resolved to get over it.

***Mr. Moony expresses astonishment that Mr. Prongs would ever experience the touch of a woman, let alone sire a child with one.***

"Well, he did!" Harry replied. "My mother is Lily Evans Potter."

The map did not respond at first.

***I married Lily? I thought ...***

***Mr. Wormtail wishes to remind Mr. Prongs to stay in character.***

***Sigh. Mr. Wormtail is correct. Mr. Prongs apologizes for his lapse.***

***Moving on, what House does Mr. Son-of-Prongs  
belong to?***

Harry hesitated. "Guess," he said.

***Mr. Prongs would be delighted to see his son in any  
house save that of the slimy serpents,  
but would be particularly pleased to see him in  
Gryffindor like his forebears.***

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Well, I'm afraid I gave the old man a bit of a heart attack when I owled him after my Sorting and told him I was in Slytherin. He actually sent me a Howler the next morning."

*Mr. Padfoot would describe that as awful if it weren't so  
bloody hilarious,  
and he wishes that Mr. Prongs had thought to play such a  
prank  
on his own parents back in 1971.*

***Mr. Prongs would never have done such a thing,  
as he had no wish to get his backside tanned by two  
angry parents.***

"So it would have really been that bad? For a Potter to ever be Sorted into Slytherin?" Harry said quietly.

***Mr. Prongs remembers his Mum and Dad describing a  
Slytherin Sorting as "a disaster beyond imagining."***

Harry was silent for several seconds. "Listen," he finally said, "I really have to get back to the dorm before curfew. I'd like to talk some more later, but I don't want ... Snivellus to catch me with this and confiscate it. Would you mind telling me the password to close it? I only got this by accident. Dad said he lost it not long before graduation."

*Mr. Padfoot thinks it unconscionable to deprive Son-of-Prongs of any part of his pranking heritage. To turn the Marauders' Map back into ordinary parchment, simply say "Mischief Managed."*

"Thank you, Mr. Padfoot. I think that makes you my favorite."

***Messrs. Prongs, Moony and Wormtail collectively say "Boooo!"***

*Mr. Padfoot sticks his tongue out at his fellow Marauders and reminds Mr. Prongs that if he holds to his word, Mr. Padfoot will someday be godfather to Son-of-Prongs, and so he has the right to be indulgent.*

Harry sighed. "Mischief managed." As anticipated, the map returned to its blank state. Harry folded it and put it away while contemplating how easy it was to lie to a piece of paper. Then, he left for the Trophy Room.

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***Five minutes later ...***

"Mr. Malfoy," Harry said respectfully. The other man turned to regard him with an imperious glare.

"Yes, Mr. Potter? Is there news of my son?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. But I thought instead of simply waiting here by yourself, you might prefer to visit the Slytherin dormitory and wait in greater comfort."

"The offer is appreciated, Mr. Potter, but I have little interest in hobnobbing with students and even less in

reliving old memories perhaps best forgotten."

Harry nodded. "I understand, sir. But still, I thought it might interest you to visit your old stomping grounds as it were. To see how things have changed since then. And how they've stayed the same. For instance," he paused significantly, "I've been using your old chair."

Lucius Malfoy's left eyebrow rose fractionally. "Ah. I see. Very well, I suppose it would do me good to revisit my student days, just this once. Lead on, Mr. Potter."

The two walked in silence. Malfoy obviously had no interest in small talk, and Harry wasn't sure how to engage him in it anyway. Moments later, they entered the dormitory, where they were immediately accosted by Cassius Warrington.

"Potter, you little brat, where the hell have you been?! What's been going ... on...?" He stopped suddenly as he recognized the man entering the Common Room behind Potter.

"Lord Malfoy, this is Cassius Warrington, a Fourth Year student. Warrington, I'm sure you recognize Draco's father."

"Of ... of course! It's a pleasure to meet you, sir! I'm the eldest son of Antonius Warrington."

"Are you really?" Malfoy said languidly. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of ever meeting the man face-to-face, though, of course, his reputation precedes him." Malfoy's polite smile belied the obvious disdain he held for the Warrington name. "Now if you'll excuse us, young Harry here and I were going to have a private chat."

Warrington swallowed. "H-Harry?" he stammered, amazed that the Lord of House Malfoy called Harry Potter by his first name.

"Yes, Warrington," Harry said, twisting the knife, "that *is* my name." Harry and Lucius glided past Warrington and into Prefect's Row. After they left, Warrington looked around wildly.

"BONNEVIE!" he cried out calling for the Sixth Year prefect.

---

"I take it you're not a fan of the Warringtons, sir?"

"No," Lucius said without elaboration. Then, in a swift movement, he pulled a wand from his cane. "***DUROS.***"

Suddenly, there was a fairly thick wall that blocked off the entrance to Prefect's Row. Harry swallowed and led the way down the corridor. Once they were at the entrance to the Lair, Harry paused and looked up expectantly towards Malfoy who simply returned his gaze. Finally giving up, Harry turned back at the fake wall, coughed lightly into his hand, and then quietly spoke the password.

"*Moldyshorts.*"

He glanced back up at Malfoy, who was staring at him with an unreadable but intense expression. Harry blushed and then stepped into the Prince's Lair ...

... before stopping short in astonishment. On the far side of the table, the nine heads of the Hydra Throne were active again and even chatting animatedly, almost happily. And sitting *on* the Throne, as if born to it was *Gilderoy Lockhart*.

"Ah, Lucius! Harry! So good you could make it! Come and sit down. We have much to discuss."

As the man flashed his award-winning smile at them, Harry's brain seemed to shut down entirely at the sight of Lockhart, not only in possession of his faculties, but *here* in the Prince's Lair where no non-Slytherin had ever set foot, and sitting in the chair that would *kill* anyone who hadn't earned the right to be there.

"Once again, you surprise me, Professor Lockhart," said Lucius Malfoy in a tone of affected boredom that perfectly concealed his own confusion. "I was given to understand that you were a Ravenclaw. And also *a vegetable*."

Harry's attention was drawn away from Lockhart and towards the placards on the wall identifying the past Princes. Then, for the second time this evening, he had the eerie experience of a kaleidoscope shifting into clarity. Once again, he *understood*.

"And you would be right on both counts," he said shakily as he looked back up at Malfoy. "Gilderoy Lockhart was a Ravenclaw. And he *is*, as you put it, a vegetable." Then, he turned towards the figure sitting on the Hydra Throne.

"Isn't that right ... *Mr. Black*?"

The DADA professor smirked and then shook his head violently in a manner very similar to how Nymphadora Tonks would reset her own appearance back to its default. Lockhart's auburn hair darkened to jet black, and a neatly trimmed black goatee sprouted around his mouth. His adorable button nose sharpened into a noble Aquiline shape. And his dreamy hazel eyes turned to a cold gray. Then, he flashed the boy a charming smile, if one not remotely winning enough to impress Witch Weekly.



"Please, Harry, we're all friends here. *Call me Regulus.*"

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: A few people guessed Regulus Black, but most people who posted their thoughts seemed to think Lockhart was either an OC Unspeakable, the missing Australian auror who was somehow possessing Lockhart, or just the regular Lockhart possessed by someone else. A few thought it might be Remus (even though I've said repeatedly that he would not show up until Year 3) or even Sirius (can't even imagine how I'd have plausibly pulled that off). A few of the clues I left include ...

Ch 24: Harry notes that Lucius's name is the second-to-last among the Princes, which means that there was a Prince between 1972 and 1991. Regulus is, IIRC, the only named Slytherin from that era who could plausibly have fit.

CH 51: Lockhart's old CoMC book survived the effects of Pandora Lovegood's use of Imago Dei due to "experimental wards" on his Gringotts vault. The Blacks are notorious for their extreme paranoia, as well as the unusual protections they place on their Gringotts' vaults.

CH 53 & 63: Lockhart expresses sadness at the thought of sibling rivalry driving apart the Weasley Twins and later the Potter Twins. He actively tried to get the Potter Twins to cooperate by giving them both reason to dislike him.

CH 67: Augusta Lockhart has a lengthy conversation about the Conscription Act in which she strongly implies that there are other Blacks besides Tonks who have the

Metamorphmagus gift but who successfully conceal it to avoid conscription.

CH 70: Lockhart comments that his mother would have had "a conniption" if she'd learned that he'd destroyed the family pensieve. Walburga Black was indeed known for her fits of uncontrollable rage.

CH 73: There are many hints that Lockhart is from Australia that all lead up to the suggestion that he is actually the missing Australian auror Lazarus White. However, that's a fake name. Lazarus is the man who came back from the dead, and White is the opposite of Black. How Regulus ended up with that name and working as an Australian auror will be answered next chapter.

CH 75: Lockhart all but announces the fact that he's a former Prince of Slytherin.

AN 2: The nearly universal trope about Dumbledore is that he's a ruthless bastard because of his belief that anything goes so long as it's For The Greater Good. So while my Dumbledore is capable of making hard decisions, he hates utilitarianism (which he associates with Grindelwald) and is more into Kantianism, although my own grasp of philosophy needs some work before I can have Dumbledore talk coherently about the relative merits of Kant and, say, Jeremy Bentham.

AN 3: I hope the people heartbroken over the death of the Basilisk are placated. The Basilisk will probably return at some point, but it will be a lot ... smaller.

AN 4: Harry's conversation with the Map was a very late addition to this chapter. I realized at the last second that he would have no opportunity to give it to

the Twins with their parents around, and if he needed to find Lucius, why wouldn't he use the Map? And then, the Marauders just started talking and talking and I was suddenly struck by the parallels between the Marauders talking through the Map and Tom talking through the Diary. I haven't decided whether anything will come of that yet.

# Meet REDACTED

## Chapter Notes

AN 1: Normally, author notes go at the end, but this chapter is an exception. First, this is easily the longest chapter I've ever written, nearly 20k words. I started to break it up, but this close to the end of Year 2, I thought some readers would go berserk if I spent three weeks talking about Regulus's backplot while Harry and Lucius were just hanging around. (You know who you are. :)) So I decided to power through and do it all in one chapter despite the extraordinary length.

AN 2 (Trigger Warnings): This may be a rough chapter for some people. Suggestions of child abuse. Significant violence. Implied sex (no lemon). Implied cannibalism. Character deaths. Simply put, Regulus Black has not had a very nice life. Raised by Walburga Black, inducted into the Death Eaters, and then reborn as Lazarus White, an Australian auror who life ended in tragedy after he ran afoul of a werewolf pack. In short, this is perhaps the darkest, most intense chapter I've written for the Prince of Slytherin series. Be warned.

AN 3: I've tried to edit this as much as possible, but the sheer length combined with how much effort it took to get this in by the deadline causes me to fear that there are an unacceptable number of typos. Sorry. I'll try to clean it up later.

## **CHAPTER 45 - Meet Regulus Black**

***9 May 1993***

***The Prince's Lair***

*"Please, Harry, we're all friends here. Call me ... Regulus."*

"I take it, Mr. Potter, that you are ... unsurprised by this development?" drawled Lucius Malfoy.

"I wouldn't say unsurprised, Mr. Malfoy, but the pieces all fit. To sit in that chair, he would have to have been a former Prince, and the number of people who've held that position and could possibly still be alive is rather small. And then, I remembered that Nymphadora Tonks, who is descended from House Black, is a Metamorphmagus, supposedly the first one in over a century. But it was recently suggested to me that Tonks wasn't necessarily the *only* Metamorphmagus from the Black family in all that time, just the only one to be discovered and forced to register under the Conscription Act."

"What can I say?" Regulus Black said with another smirk. "I've always been an overachiever."

"Indeed," said Malfoy. "Well, I look forward to hearing the tale of exploits that led you to return to Hogwarts while masquerading as a foppish Defense instructor, but first, there is a matter of protocol to consider."

"Oh?" Regulus responded.

"Yes. Specifically, there are strict protocols for recognizing the primacy of Princes-Emeritus when more than one of us is present in this room, as the runespoor can expound upon at length. So with that in mind, I would respectfully request that you kindly remove yourself from my chair."

"Oh come on, Lucius," Regulus said irritably. "Are you really going to pull rank on me at a time like - ACK!" The former Prince jumped suddenly as the three-headed silver

runespoor suddenly leaned in and began to hiss and snap at him angrily.

"Alright, alright! Honestly!" he said as he got up and relocated to the chair to the left of the Hydra Throne. "*Of course* the runespoor like *you* best, Lucius. It probably admires how skillfully you hold that stick in place between your arse cheeks. Oh well, at least Delilah still loves me, don't you dearie?"

The boomslang hissed fondly at Regulus, and Harry was delighted to realize he understood her and the other snakes once more.

"Delilah loves everyone, Regulus," Malfoy said as he took his seat on the Throne. "That's part of her charm." He turned to the boomslang and tickled her under the chin (in the exact same manner that Harry often had, to the boy's surprise).

"Wait, are both of you Parselmouths?" he asked excitedly. "Or did you gain that ability when you each became Prince?"

"The latter, sort of," Regulus said as he tried to get comfortable in his chair. "*You know I don't think I ever sat in one of these chairs when I was Prince,*" he muttered to himself before turning back to Harry. "When the Hydra approves a Slytherin as Prince, he or she gains a limited amount of Parseltongue. We can't talk with real or conjured snakes, but we can communicate with the Hydra or with any other of the artificial snakes of Hogwarts Castle."

He smiled. "You being a real Parselmouth – and aren't you a mean one for letting everyone think your brother was the only one around – well that just gives you an unfair advantage in claiming the Throne for yourself. Which is, of

course, a perfectly Slytherin way of doing things. But there are ways of attracting the Hydra's attention without it, though typically it takes longer. Most Princes don't gain the title until Fifth Year."

"Indeed," said Lucius. "A slight majority of Princes have been Parselmouths throughout history, though there have been fewer and fewer since the passage of the Inheritance Act and other government policies meant to destroy the legacy of Salazar Slytherin. But enough about ancient history – Regulus Black, I should like to know very much where you have been these last thirteen years."

"Well, Lucius, it's a long story. One that starts with a cave in Dorset. No, that's not right. It really begins ... with a house elf."

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***17 June 1966***  
***12 Grimauld Place***

"Master Regulus?" said Kreacher in a gentle voice. The house elf was always gentle with Regulus, who was his favorite of all the Black children. Sirius and Andromeda were always too rambunctious, while Bellatrix was too shy and Narcissa too mean and spoiled. But Regulus always had an inner core of ... *something* that pleased the house elf, and so the house elf always showed him favoritism. In his sadder moments, Kreacher feared Regulus might be Sorted into Hufflepuff when his time came (he was certain Sirius would be a *Gryffindor!*), and the house elf feared how the boy's parents would respond if that came to pass. Orion and Walburga Black were quite mad, after all, and as an inevitable consequence, Kreacher was relatively mad as well. Which was to be expected, of course – that was the way of good house elves who had the misfortune of having

mad masters. But Kreacher had a soft spot for Regulus, and he hoped the boy's parents would too, no matter what his Sorting.

This was a special day for Regulus. Today, he turned seven. He had already shown strong magic, and by surviving to the age of seven, Regulus had proved his worthiness to be a Black, as Sirius had the year before. And as was proper for a child of an Ancient and Noble House, Regulus's seventh birthday would be attended by a party attended by all of his cousins and by the children of all the House's allies and vassals. Naturally, of course, jealous little Sirius had already tied to ruin Regulus's special day. The night before, Sirius had gotten hold of some of Mistress Walburga's cutting scissors and used them to "trim" Master Regulus's hair. The boy's long curly locks had been lopped off, and he looked like a badly shorn black sheep. Walburga had been furious and ravaged Sirius with Stinging Hexes for an hour as the boy begged for mercy. Kreacher had watched impassively for he was a good house elf and could do naught else. Then, before sending Regulus to bed, she promised him that they would wake him up bright and early the next morning and carry him to Whithershanks, the magical barber in Diagon Alley who would fix his hair right up in time for his party.

Kreacher called for young Regulus again, and the young boy finally sat up in his bed, yawned and stretched.

"Kreacher? What is it?" the boy asked, as he'd noticed how strangely the house elf regarded him.

"Master Regulus! Your hair!" Kreacher said in surprise.

Regulus frowned. He was sure his hair still looked awful, but Kreacher had known that the night before. Had it gotten worse during the night? Regulus reached up to feel



his head, and then, he was astonished to feel a full head of hair. He jumped out of bed to check the mirror on his dresser. Amazingly, his hair had grown back! In fact, it even looked longer, curlier, and more lustrous than it had the night before.

"Master Regulus must stay here," said Kreacher. "Kreacher will fetch the Master and Mistress." Regulus hardly listened, so fixated was he on his regrown hair. A few minutes later, Sirius came in, equally astonished at how his little brother looked.

"No way! You regrew your hair! How'd ya do that overnight?!" Then, Sirius yelped, as there was a flash of light and a sharp pain in his backside.

"Sirius!" shouted Walburga. "I told you last night you were to remain in your room until we gave you leave to come out again! Begone!" And she shot him with another painful hex. He started towards the door when Orion Black entered. By that time, Walburga was staring intently at Regulus, and Orion soon joined her. She pointed a wand at the boy and cast a quick spell.

"It is possible, Walburga?" Orion asked quietly.

"It is more than possible, husband. Attend to Sirius. I shall explain things to Regulus."

"Father?" said Sirius. "What's going on?"

"It's none of your concern, brat! Come with me!"

"But Father...!" Zap. "OWW!"

Regulus was suddenly nervous. Though only seven, he'd lived in Grimauld Place his whole life. He knew what

Walburga was like when she was in her moods. Once Orion and Sirius were outside, Kreacher felt Master Orion's magic surge, and he recognized the faint smell of cinnamon and petrichor, which the house elf recognized as the scent of an Obliviation. Master Sirius would remember nothing of these matters. Walburga sat Regulus down on his bed.

"My son, today is a blessed day, for you have shown a rare and special gift, one that has not manifested in our family in many years. You are blessed, my son ... and also cursed. For there are those who would use you for your talent. Those who would enslave you. Tomorrow, we shall make arrangements for you to meet with your Great-Aunt Cassiopeia. She will have much to teach you, though I warn you that she may be a harsh teacher. She will not coddle you as I have these many years."

Regulus shuddered. If Walburga's parenting was "coddling," he was frightened to think what Cassiopeia would be like.

"She will help you to develop your gift," she continued. "But it is one you must conceal, must hide away forever except for when you are compelled to use it. For those *fools* in the Ministry would be jealous if they found out. They would enslave you to their will, and you would never reach the glory expected of a son of House Black. Why, they might even force you to consort with Mudbloods!"

Regulus nodded silently. After seven years, he still wasn't sure what a Mudblood was, but he knew from his mother and father that they were the worst things in the world.

In the corner, Kreacher smiled. Long had he watched this one, and Kreacher was certain that Regulus was touched by Fate, even as Sirius was. Walburga and Orion would pay for

their sins with madness, decay, and like an early death, but no matter how many Stinging Hexes the psychotic woman fired off at them, their sons would someday flourish.

Well, the two younger sons, anyway.

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**12 July 1972**  
**The Leaky Cauldron**  
**Diagon Alley**

The young man was thin, skin and bones practically, with dark skin and hair styled into what a Muggle might describe as "an impressive Afro." In fact, had he not obviously been a wizard thanks to his fashionable robes, onlookers might have thought he'd just gotten off a boat from Africa. He made his way through the Leaky Cauldron before finding a secluded booth near the back, one that was already occupied. Said occupant appeared to be a young woman in her late-twenties, drop dead gorgeous with red hair, green eyes and a fashionable low-cut dress.

Appearances were deceptive where the House of Black was concerned.

The woman looked up. "Excuse me," she said irritably at the boy's presumption. "Do I know you?"

"You're slipping in your old age, Auntie," the boy said cheekily. "You wore that same body last year."

The woman made a face. "Did I really? My, how they all run together after a while. Hardly was a fair test now was it, my dear Regulus?"

Regulus studied his Great Aunt Cassiopeia carefully. "This was no test, Aunt Cassiopeia. You weren't even trying to

conceal yourself. What's going on?"

"Don't be so paranoid, Regulus. Can't an old woman just want to say goodbye to her favorite nephew?"

"You're not *old* at the moment, Aunt Cassiopeia. In fact, you look rather ... wait, what do you mean goodbye?"

"Hmmph. And now, I'll never know how that sentence would have ended," she said with a saucy smirk. "When I said goodbye, I meant goodbye. I've decided to leave Britain, for a while at least. Things are getting a bit dicey here with that Voldemort chap on the rise. So I've decided to go abroad for a while."

"Why would you be afraid of Lord Voldemort? He's supports the Purebloods. Mother says he'll ensure that the Blacks rise to the top again."

"Does she now. Well, personally, Little Regulus, I've never heard of a Dark Lord who ever wanted anyone to rise but himself. In any case, you're starting Hogwarts in a few months. You'll need to focus on learning real magic, not the trickery I've been teaching you."

Regulus shook his head in annoyance. "But where will you go?"

She studied the menu carefully. "I was thinking of Marseilles."

Regulus was quiet at that. "Marius and Alphard both live in Marseilles."

"Indeed they do, Little Regulus. And soon, I'll be there with them. Three gay bachelors enjoying the sights and sounds of the French Riviera. It will be divine."

Regulus said nothing for a moment before he finally spoke. "Marius and Alphard aren't part of the family anymore."

"No, Marius and Alphard aren't on Walburga's precious genealogy tree anymore. They'll always be family to me." Finally, she looked up into Regulus's eyes and pierced him with the intensity of her expression. "You may say I don't *look* old right now, but that doesn't change the fact that I *am* old. In the end, Metamorphmagic can't change who you *really are* on the inside. I'm an old woman, and I've no idea how much time I have left. I've decided to stop squandering it in order to maintain a fragile peace with people whose narrow-minded views bore me. I mean, it's not like I have any children of my own to tie me to this benighted nation." She paused and smirked again. "Well, none that I know of."

"What does that mean?" he asked in confusion. She crooked an eyebrow at him ... and then, suddenly, the beautiful young woman transformed into a tall handsome muscular man with red hair and green eyes ... and still wearing the low cut dress.

"What are you *doing*?!" he hissed at her while looking around wildly to see if anyone had been watching. In an instant, she was in her previous form and laughing at him.

"I'll miss you, Regulus. You're so easily scandalized."

The boy sighed and rubbed his forehead. Then, he looked up suddenly. "Wait a minute. So when you say you and Marius and Alphard will be a trio of bachelors, you mean ...?"

"Yes, I am indeed planning to spend some time on the French Riviera seeing how the other half lives."

He wiped his hand over his face as if trying to erase an awful thought. "*Please* don't share any of your ... exploits with me until I'm at least fifteen."

She laughed again and turned back to the menu.

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***1 July 1976***

***Chevenoir (The Estate of Arcturus Black)***

Regulus sat uncomfortably in the high-backed chair at the formal table in his grandfather's dining room and tried his best to look neither miserable nor frightened . He was miserable because he had just lost his brother. He was frightened because of *how* he lost his brother. Three nights before, his mother had put Sirius under the Cruciatus Curse for seven seconds over some disagreement about politics. The next night, Sirius had snuck out of 12 Grimauld Place and disappeared. The morning after that, Walburga and Orion received an owl from Charlus Potter tersely stating that Sirius was with the Potter family, that Charlus had begun legal proceedings to make Sirius a ward of House Potter, and that Walburga and Orion would acquiesce to that unless Walburga wanted to spend the rest of her life in Azkaban for using an Unforgivable Curse. The *next* morning, they received another owl, this one from Lord Arcturus Black informing Walburga and Orion that they and "*those two fine strapping lads of yours*" would be joining his Lordship for dinner that evening at Chevenoir ... any alternative dinner plans be damned.

Though only in his mid-seventies, Arcturus Black looked much older than a wizard of his years should. He was largely confined to a wicker wheelchair, and attached to the back of it was a strange breathing apparatus which consisted of a mask connected via a tube to a small portable

tank full of a thick blue mist. Also in the tank were a dozen or so tiny faerie-like creatures the like of which Regulus had never seen before. Ever so often, Arcturus would start to cough, and then he would place the mask over his face and breath deeply. The tiny floating creatures would glow more brightly and then dim in time with his labored breathing.

Dinner was excruciatingly tense, particularly since there had been a place setting for Sirius ... and the house elves had apparently been instructed to pretend Sirius was actually there, placing each new course in turn and then returning to remove the untouched food. Lord Black himself made no mention of Sirius's absence. Instead, he made amiable chitchat about Regulus's Quidditch success, his upcoming dueling tournament on the continent, on the likelihood that he might become Slytherin prefect in his Fifth Year. Finally, when a house elf removed Sirius's untouched plate of salmon amandine with roasted asparagus and replaced it with an enormous slice from an Italian cream cake complete with a scoop of ice cream, Walburga finally snapped.

"Arcturus! Enough of these games! You brought us here because of what happened to Sirius, so say what you mean to say and be done with it!"

The old man took a long sip from his wine glass with a deliberate, almost majestic slowness.

"What ... *happened* to Sirius? And tell me, Walburga. What *exactly* happened to my heir that should demand my attention?"

Regulus looked up in surprise. As far as he knew, his father Orion was Arcturus's heir. The old man noticed his confusion.

"Oh yes, Regulus. Your father surrendered his right to the Black Lordship many years ago, and I selected your older brother Sirius to stand in his place, though Sirius himself likely has no idea of that fact."

"Father ...!" Orion interrupted.

"Do you have something intelligent to add to the discussion, Orion?" Arcturus inquired with an oddly terrifying mildness. Orion looked down at his dessert plate and finally shook his head piteously.

"I thought not," Arcturus continued before turning to Walburga. "I have brought you here because I have things to explain to your *other* son. Things he must know. Burdens he must now carry. Sirius remains my heir, Walburga, but *you*, by your contemptible actions, have most likely made him into a sworn enemy of the Dark Lord, and few wizards survive that designation for long. Consequently, I am forced to pursue ... contingency plans."

"I hope the Dark Lord *obliterates* him!" Walburga spat angrily but without making eye contact with Arcturus.

Arcturus laughed contemptuously. "Perhaps he will, Walburga. But *you* will not! Hear me now both of you! I *forbid* either of you to take any further action against Sirius! If it his destiny to die at the hands of Voldemort or his lackeys, so be it. But if I learn that either of you have done *anything* to harm him..." He paused and then narrowed his eyes as he studied Walburga. The woman still wouldn't make eye contact with him, and Regulus thought she was wise. For the first time, he could see why so many people feared Arcturus Black.

"You know me, Walburga Black," he said in a cold breathy whisper that hinted at hidden power barely constrained.



"You know the secrets I guard and the powers I command. If you challenge me in this matter, you will *wish* I had contented myself to strike you down with the Unforgivable Curse you so foolishly used on my grandson. *I will make you beg for death.* Nod if you understand me."

Still without looking up from her melting dessert, Walburga Black nodded once.

"Good," Arcturus said. "Now leave us. Neither of you seems interested in dessert, so begone both of you. I will send the boy home via Floo when I am done with him."

Without another word, and without looking at their completely unnerved son, Walburga and Orion Black rose and stiffly walked out of the dining room. Arcturus watched them leave before turning back to Regulus.

"Finish your cake, Regulus. Ophelia, my kitchen elf, is exceptionally talented at desserts."

Regulus nodded quietly and returned to his dessert which he ate in silence. Afterwards, the two retired to Arcturus's private study where the old man's chief house elf, Catesby, provided a butterbeer for Regulus and a glass of port for the old man. Arcturus studied his grandson for what seemed like an eternity before speaking.

"Did you bring your wand, Regulus?" he finally asked.

Regulus nodded quickly and pulled out his wand.

"You will swear an oath of secrecy covering everything we say in here tonight. Now."

"But ... Grandfather ... the Trace."

"The Trace does not apply tonight. I've made arrangements."

Regulus swallowed once more and swore the oath. Arcturus nodded and then resumed his silent study of the boy. After another eternity, he spoke again.

"How ... how do they treat you?"

Regulus opened his mouth to defend his parents, but at his grandfather's look, he decided against it.

"Not ... *too* badly. Sirius was always the one to draw their ire. They ... um, they used lots of Stinging Hexes. *Lots* of Stinging Hexes. They didn't start with ... well, with anything I'd call *torture* until last summer. Even then, they never used anything like the Cruciatus until the other day." Regulus looked down suddenly. "I ... I don't know if their attitudes towards me will change now that Sirius is gone."

"They will not harm you, Regulus," Arcturus said. "I will see to it. I ... apologize profusely for my role in your mistreatment and that of your brother. I should have been ... more proactive."

"It's not your fault, Grandfather," Regulus quickly said.

"Oh, but it is, my boy, it is. You see ..." Arcturus paused and, for a man of his natural power, suddenly looked quite vulnerable. "I was the one responsible for your parents' madness."

Regulus stared at the man, speechless.

Arcturus nodded as if to confirm the truth of his words. "We Blacks pride ourselves on the purity of our blood. *Toujour Pur* and all that. But there are limits to what levels of

consanguinity can be tolerated either by magic and society. First cousins marrying exceeds that limit."

Regulus shook his head. "I don't understand. First cousins? I know Father and Mother are second cousins but ..."

"*First* cousins. That family tree your mother guards so jealously and prunes so furiously contains some ... inaccuracies. Most notably, for purposes of our discussion, Pollux Black, my cousin and your putative grandfather, was sterile, the result of a curse he'd suffered when he was a young man. Rather than annul his wedding to your grandmother, Irma Crabbe, and bring scandal down upon the house – not to mention be forced to repay the exorbitant dowry she'd brought to their marriage – Pollux arranged for Irma to enter into a long-term adulterous relationship with my younger brother, Regulus, for whom you are named. Thus, your mother is not my first cousin but my *niece*, a fact which was concealed from me until after I approved of their marriage and, indeed, after their eldest child was born."

"Sirius?" Regulus said, but he was surprised when Arcturus shook his head no.

"You and Sirius had an older brother, Polaris Black. He was ... severely deformed. Worse, he was violently insane, even from early childhood."

"What happened to him?" Regulus asked. Arcturus merely gazed at him before changing the subject. The name Polaris Black would not be mentioned again that night.

"I still needed a strong heir to confirm the continuation of our line. Orion was my only son. Cygnus had only daughters, and Alphard ... was unsuitable for other reasons. *I had to act.*"

Something in the old man's tone suggested that he was for some reason asking forgiveness from Regulus. A quiet fear fluttered in the boy's stomach.

"What did you do, Grandfather?"

Arcturus paused and took three long dragging breaths from his breathing mask. Then, he looked back to Regulus with a steady gaze.

"I compelled your parents each to take a rare potion. One which is not illegal per se but which is certainly ... controversial. You see, it's only utility is in facilitating incestuous relationships." Regulus looked a bit sick at the turn the discussion had taken. Arcturus continued.

"The potion had the effect of ensuring that a child born of a union that would otherwise suffer the signs of inbreeding would instead be born in perfect mental, physical, and magical health. Instead, any debilities that *should* have afflicted the child would manifest in the parents instead in the form of mental illness. After that, Orion and Walburga gave me Sirius, who was everything I wanted in an heir despite, or perhaps *because of*, his rebelliousness. Had they stopped there, your parents would have been highly eccentric, but not beyond the acceptable boundaries for wizarding behavior in this day and age."

"But they had me," Regulus said in a very soft voice.

Arcturus nodded. "They did. And what had been mere eccentricity became madness leavened with paranoia and a growing tendency towards sadism. Early on in Sirius's childhood, I bound them both against inflicting any true harm on either of you, but I did not anticipate Walburga's ... creativity, let alone the possibility that she would one day become so maddened as to use the Cruciatus. I ... I am

sorry that I was not more attentive to your needs. I suppose that I felt the guilt of what I'd done to my own son too acutely and so wished to avoid thinking on the matter. I apologize."

Regulus sat quietly without responding. Finally, he spoke. "So ... what do we do now?"

"An astute question. I suppose it depends. What are your feelings about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Regulus blinked in confusion at the apparent non sequitur. "I ... I'm not sure. Most of my Slytherin peers idolize him. They think he'll be the one to restore Pureblood primacy and roll back the impositions that the Mudbloods have put on our rights."

Arcturus nodded. "Will you become a Death Eater if offered the chance? If you do, it will put you at odds against Sirius."

"I am not Sirius, and his mistakes are not mine. As for the Death Eaters, I ... I suppose I will if asked. We must stand up for our freedoms, after all." He hesitated. "Does that ... displease you, Grandfather? You seem to support Sirius in his defiance."

"In this matter, Regulus, I have declared myself *Gray*. Whether the Dark Lord rises or falls, the House of Black must endure. We have a purpose that transcends the sectarian conflicts of the day, a burden we have carried since before the Wizengamot was even a word. So many of the other Ancient and Noble Houses have fallen into ruin and been lost to us. So many even today have forgotten our ancient purposes. Harfang Longbottom died before his time, and I don't even know if he passed along the ancient knowledge to his son Archimedes. Charlus Potter is a fool who raised his only son as a wastrel. The Gaunts and Gamps

are extinct, and the Doges are soon to follow. Malfoy? Nott? Selwyn? Wilkes? Rosier? All given over to corruption of one form or another. You and your brother are my last hope. Can you blame me for wanting to ensure that you were powerful, healthy, and *sane* wizards?"

Arcturus leaned back in his wheelchair. "No, Regulus. If you are not opposed to joining the Dark Lord, then you have my leave to do so, provided that you promise to be careful about it and to *survive* at all costs. Just as Sirius has my leave to take up arms against the Dark Lord. Whether Voldemort wins or loses, *one of you* must survive to carry on the name of Black and take your place along the watchtower."

"Along ... the watchtower?" Regulus was confused. Arcturus simply nodded gravely.

"When the seventeen Ancient and Noble Houses joined together to form the first Wizard's Council, the precursor to the Wizengamot, we had a purpose, and it was indeed a noble one. A purpose you must now be made to understand." Arcturus lifted his head and called out to his house elf.

"Catesby! Fetch the book!" A few seconds later, there was a pop, and Arcturus's favorite house elf was there bearing aloft an ancient tome with a leather cover and a metal latch to keep it closed and locked when not in use. Though the gilded letters on the front cover were faded with time, Regulus could still faintly make out two words.

### ***Anathema Codex***

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**9 June 1979**  
**8:00 p.m.**

## Upper Appleby

As Regulus listened to the screams of the victims, he narrowly fought down the urge to vomit inside his mask. As revolting as the display was, on some level he thought the worst thing might be having to admit to himself that *Sirius had been right*. For years, Regulus's mother and father had extolled the virtues of Lord Voldemort, the Pureblood Messiah who would purge Wizarding Britain of all blood traitors and Mudbloods and restore the rightful ascendancy of the Purebloods and the Ancient and Noble Houses who led them. And for years, those had been just words, words he had internalized and Sirius had mocked. Better acceptance, he'd thought, than bear the lash as Sirius had seemed eager to do. In his Sixth Year, Regulus had become Prince of Slytherin in large part because he had become the most eloquent advocate for the Dark Lord's views among the Slytherins, even though he'd never met the man face to face. Granted, aspects of the Hydra Throne were ... dissatisfied with Voldemort's agenda, and as a whole, the Hydra was unwilling to share anything it might know about the Dark Lord. In the end, though, Regulus Black ruled Slytherin in Voldemort's name for his last two years of school, while Sirius seemed to continually flirt with expulsion no matter how well he did in class.

But now, all of that seemed childishly irrelevant in the face of the *reality* of following Voldemort: pointless violent carnage. Tonight had been Regulus's very first mission as a Death Eater ... and he was already sick of it. He was not a full member yet – he would take the Dark Mark in a week's time on his eighteenth birthday – but this night was his formal introduction to the Knights of Walpurgis. Dolohov, the degenerate swine, had been put in charge. The attack had been on the small wizarding village of Upper Appleby, which had been targeted because it was located within a

larger Muggle town and the wizards of Upper Appleby were assimilated into Muggle culture to a degree the Dark Lord found unacceptable.

It had been one thing for Regulus to hear his mother rant constantly about "Mudblood filth" (and oh how her rants had gotten worse since Orion had passed away just a few months earlier). But to be on an actual raid? To hear the screams firsthand? Suddenly, Walburga's bigoted rants were revealed for the ignorant hateful nonsense they truly were.

But the worst part were those twins. They weren't aurors, but they fought like aurors, powerfully and boldly. It was just the two of them, but they'd shown up out of nowhere and dared to take on five Death Eaters in order to buy time for a score or so Mudbloods to escape from the range of the Death Eaters' anti-Portkey and anti-Apparation wards. Though Regulus himself was already a champion duelist within his age group, he was genuinely impressed with the twins' combat skill. But even more so than their skill, Regulus was impressed by their bravery in fighting such odds to cover the Mudbloods and blood traitors of Upper Appleby as they fled. Then, one of the twins got in a lucky shot against Rosier with a Cutting Curse, causing the Death Eater to drop his wand. The sound of Rosier's scream startled Regulus, and more out of instinct than any intent, the boy fired off an Expelliarmus that got past the man's defense, stripping him of his wand.

"Fabian!" the other twin had cried out as he tried to throw a shield over his defenseless brother, only to leave himself exposed in the process. Dolohov lashed out with his signature Entrail-Expelling Curse, and Regulus once more came close to vomiting at the sight of the spell's grisly effects.



"Gideon! You bastards!" The other twin scrambled towards his fallen brother who was now seconds from death and tried to reach for his wand. He never stood a chance.

"**CRUCIO!**" Rosier's Cruciatus Curse hit the poor man – Fabian Prewitt, according to the next day's newspaper account – and his screams were ear-shattering. The other Death Eaters soon joined in, laughing at the man's agony. Rosier even suggested that they take him back to their base and see how long they could torture someone and still keep him alive. Suddenly, Regulus realized how much he hated Evan Rosier. How much he hated Antonin Dolohov. How much he even hated his mother and father for encouraging him into this life. And as he watched Fabian Prewitt scream in agony and flop around helplessly in the blood and viscera of his murdered twin, Regulus suddenly hated *himself*. Luckily, there was one spell for which absolute hatred was a prerequisite.

"**AVADA KEDAVRA,**" Regulus said in a eerily calm voice. A bolt of green energy shot from his wand into the body of Fabian Prewett, ending his pain and his life with a single spell.

"What was that for, Mr. Blanco?" Rosier said petulantly. "I had plans for that one." Dolohov and the others also turned back to face him. Regulus ignored Rosier and instead addressed Dolohov.

"We are here on business, are we not, Mr. Farmer? This ... indulgence has cost us valuable time and also allowed many of our quarry to run far enough from our wards to escape and even to summon help. Unless you are ready to face real aurors instead of talented amateurs, perhaps its time we departed."

"Why you arrogant little ...!" Rosier fired off a Cutting Curse towards Regulus, but he batted it aside casually. It was for his skills at a duelist that he'd been recruited by members of the Dark Lord's Inner Circle, after all. Rosier, for all his exuberant brutality, was no match for him one-on-one. But if the other three joined in?

Dolohov studied Regulus and then laughed. "That's enough, Mr. Petal. Young Mr. Blanco is correct. We've made our point tonight, and it's time we were leaving."

With that, the Death Eaters left Upper Appleby and returned to their base for debriefing. From there, Regulus returned home ... where he promptly and finally threw up into a trashcan in his room. Soon after, he'd called Kreacher to clean it up, but then, he remembered that he'd loaned the use of Kreacher to the Dark Lord earlier that day, and the house elf had not returned yet.

An hour later, after Regulus had cleaned up his own sick for the first time in his life, the house elf finally returned, and to Regulus's shock, he seemed nearly dead. Carefully, he picked up the tiny creature and placed him on a nearby couch.

"Kreacher? What happened? Where is our lord?" Regulus asked desperately. The house elf could only look up at him ... and weep piteously.

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**13 June 1979**

**Midnight**

**A cave set in a seaside cliff near Clacton-on-Sea**

Regulus stared into the bowl with trepidation. Beneath the strange glowing water was a golden locket that bore a stylized "S" of the sort that usually appeared in depictions

of Salazar Slytherin. Kreacher had brought him here after spending days recuperating from what the Dark Lord had done to him. He had tortured the house elf, forcing him to drink some foul potion designed to drive men mad ... *as a mere test of his defenses*. Regulus had tended to Kreacher as best he could, but he feared the poor thing would never truly recover from his experience. But all that was far from Regulus's mind. All he could think about now is what the house elf had told him about *why* the Dark Lord needed to test the defenses of this place. What on *Earth* could he be hiding here that would need an army of inferi to protect it?! Regulus thought he knew and feared he was right.

The wizard closed his eyes and steeled himself. Then, he pointed his wand at the bowl and cast the identification spell that Arcturus Black had taught him the summer he turned fifteen. Inside its basin, the locket glowed slightly, and then a single sigil appeared in the air over the deadly potion. Regulus stared, transfixed in horror. In the summer of 1976, his grandfather had insisted that he learn all the identification sigils from the Anathema Codex. Much of the contents of that dire book were terrifying for the young boy, but as Arcturus had told him, he had an obligation to learn and recognize the spells and rituals contained within it.

*The Lament Configuration... The Bane of Sicily... The Rune of Singular Hate... The Six-Fingered Hand... The Nightmare Child... The Feast of Shadows... Imago Dei... The Inverted Mirror... The Hounds of Tindalos... The Horcrux.*

And that last nightmare was what lay resting at the bottom of the basin. A horcrux. "*The Dark Lord made a horcrux,*" Regulus thought to himself as he fought the urge to laugh hysterically. "*The Dark Lord is the sort of person even capable of making a horcrux! And I am four days away from taking his mark and swearing to him my undying*

*allegiance!"* Regulus did laugh at that. The sound of his strangled giggle reverberated around the cavern eerily, and he quickly got hold of himself.

"Kreacher!" he commanded. "Tell me again everything you know about the defenses of this object."

The house elf complied, and Regulus soon understood the purpose of the trap. To secure the locket, either he would drink all of the potion, or he could command Kreacher to do it, and the bound servant would do so even though he would surely die from a second exposure to the cursed liquid. On another night, he might have made a different decision. But he had just spent days nursing the loyal Kreacher back to health. And just four days before, he had taken his first life. It didn't matter that he had saved Fabian Prewett from a fate worse than death. He had murdered, and his guilt demanded atonement. And so, at his command, Kreacher fed the repentant Death Eater bowl after bowl of Voldemort's devilish potion. With each sip, Regulus wept as he recalled every hateful remark ever made to him and every one he'd made to someone less fortunate. Every time he hid under the covers and pretended he couldn't hear Sirius crying in the next room. Every time he'd felt the sting of his mother's wand, and every time he'd *deliberately* gotten Sirius into trouble rather than bear the lash of their mother's anger by himself. And between each memory, always, *always* the screams of those wizards and witches from Upper Appleby who couldn't escape, and the cold lifeless eyes of Fabian Prewitt staring up at him in accusation.

Finally, the potion had been drunk, and Kreacher followed the rest of his orders. He took the locket, leaving behind the copy Regulus had transfigured and the mocking note it contained. The house elf swore that he would destroy the

horcrux-locket. And Regulus, alone and wracked by agonizing thirst, would die in expiation of his sins.

Slowly, Regulus crawled over to the water's edge. He knew that if he touched the water, the inferi would take him. But he also knew that if he did nothing, the thirst would take him instead, and the inferi at least promised a swifter death. He reached his hand into the water and barely had time for a sip when a bony hand barely covered with ragged decaying flesh reached out to grab him and pull him into the lake. He had time for one breath, and though he was prepared to die, he still struggled. More and more inferi grabbed at him and clawed his skin. Still, he held his breath until his lungs were burning. But despite his earlier despair, as ever more of the disgusting undead monsters descended upon him, a new and powerful thought came bursting into his head.

*"I want to live!"*

With that thought, Regulus suddenly felt his skin burn and his muscles stretch. His body spasmed in pain, causing him to release what little air was left in his lungs. Now truly drowning, he struggled harder against the inferi who, to his surprise, released him and withdrew slowly, almost fearfully. His head broke the surface of the lake, and he gasped and greedily sucked in air. His experience in the lake, as awful as it was, seemed to have cured him of the magical thirst caused by the potion, and Regulus swam back to the shore and hauled himself back onto dry land. He looked back towards the lake in confusion, wondering what could possibly have driven back the army of inferi. Then, he looked down at his hands. They were different, thinner, unnaturally pale ... and had a number of snake scales in a random pattern across them. Regulus then carefully felt his face and head. The lack of hair was a shock. The lack of a

nose, even more so. Slowly, Regulus crept towards the waters of the underground lake and stared at his own reflection. Then, once again, he began to laugh hysterically.

The face of the Dark Lord himself, Lord Voldemort, laughed with him.

Apparently, in his panic and terror, Regulus had shapeshifted into the one form that the inferi would not attack – their creator. Exhausted from his efforts, Regulus slowly stumbled over to the boat that had brought him to the island and then used it to cross the lake to safety. Once out of the cave, he closed his eyes and centered himself. It would be ridiculous to have gone through all that only to splinch himself here at the end. When his mind was ready, Regulus apparated away.

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Regulus made his way first to Chevenoir. Lord Black would need to know what Regulus had learned. He would need to know that Voldemort had fashioned a horcrux, that there was no longer any place for a *Gray* wizard if one such as he threatened to become the future of the wizarding world. But to Regulus's surprise, he found Chevenoir sealed off, its wards now reattuned to block family as well as enemies. Though Regulus would not learn the truth until much later, the elderly Lord Black had suffered a massive stroke two days earlier while Regulus was attending to his house elf in seclusion. The old man had feared for years that the more ruthless of his children and grandchildren might seize any moment of weakness as a chance to end him and claim his legacy, so when he fell, his own house elves followed their instructions to the letter, warding Chevenoir against all intruders and attending to the round-the-clock needs of the now bedridden Lord Black.

From there, Regulus made his way to Grimauld Place which he entered stealthily so as not to alert his mother to his arrival. Kreacher was there and overjoyed to see him, for the house elf had thus far failed in his efforts to destroy the locket. Regulus himself was just as flummoxed. If house elf magic couldn't destroy the thing, Fiendfyre was the only other option Regulus knew of. Unfortunately, while he knew *how* to cast Fiendfyre, he was not personally able to do so. The spell was esoteric and required a very particular mindset to cast, one Regulus was not presently capable of maintaining. Reluctantly, Regulus was forced to conclude that destroying the horcrux was beyond his ability, so he charged Kreacher with continuing to do everything he could to destroy the locket, and then he Obliviated the house elf of the knowledge of his own continued survival.

That left Regulus with only one question left: *what should he do next?* A part of him thought he should inform someone, Dumbledore perhaps, of what he'd learned, but as soon as the thought entered his head, he felt the oaths he'd sworn to Arcturus tighten around his heart. The Anathema Codex was a matter for the Ancient and Noble Houses. Consequently, the number of people about whom he could discuss such matters was frighteningly small, and of those people he knew of who he *could* conceivably speak to about the horcrux, there were none he considered reliable. Indeed, the only plausible one was Sirius, and it was absurd to think that Sirius would listen to anything he had to say. As far as Regulus could tell, Sirius would be more likely to arrest him as a Death Eater than listen to him about the Dark Lord's horcrux. If nothing else, Regulus still carried the wand used to kill Fabian Prewett just a few nights earlier, and he had no idea whether the aurors could still identify it as a murder weapon.

Regulus quickly realized that for the time being, flight was his best option. He would need to be out of Britain before Death Eaters were sent to look for him. He laughed. "*After all,*" he thought, "*I'm to be branded with the Dark Lord's mark in just a few days! Of course, he'll want his guest of honor there!*" Regulus shook his head and practically snarled his rejection of that idea. Then, he threw some clothes into a bag and apparated to Diagon Alley and Gringotts. From the goblin bank, he emptied out the secret vault Arcturus had given him as emergency money in case Walburga or Orion became "*difficult.*" Then, he made his way to Knockturn Alley, to a small shop he knew of where, for the right amount of gold, one could acquire unregistered International Portkeys. Every Slytherin knew that there was one place a wizard on the run could go to lose his pursuers and find himself – Australia. When the shady wizard who provided the illegal portkey asked what name should go on the papers accompanying it, Regulus hesitated for a second before seizing on the surname he was now rejecting, as well as the fact that he had just effectively come back from the dead to start a new life for himself.

"White," he said. "Lazarus White."

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**2 January 1980**

**Wagga Wagga Township**

**New South Wales, Australia**

Having lived his entire life in Britain (and having lived an insular life even by the standards of most Brits), to say "Lazarus White" was out of his element in Australia was a bit of an understatement. Australia's total wizarding population was slightly smaller than Britain's, and it was spread across a whole continent. But then again, Australia's Muggle population was only about a third of Britain's, which



meant that the the wizard-to-Muggle ratio was much higher. The largest wizarding settlement in Australia was Horizont Alley in Sydney, which housed over 500 wizards and witches, about the same number as Diagon Alley. There were sizeable communities across the continent, but he was amazed to learn that in most of them, wizards seemed to split their time evenly between wizarding society and Muggle society – working in Muggle jobs, partaking in Muggle entertainment, and dallying with Muggle partners to a degree that would make Voldemort want to scour Australia from the face of the world.

Purebloods, or at least Purebloods as he'd recognized the concept were rare, as the vast majority of wizards had at least one Muggle grandparent. Australia's wizarding population overwhelmingly consisted of Muggleborns and Halfbloods mainly of British descent who'd decided beginning in the middle of the 19th Century that there was no future for them in England. Europe was considered just as bad, while the various wizarding governments of the Americas all had reputations for intrusiveness of a different sort that put the British Ministry to shame. Here in Australia, however, wizards and witches integrated themselves freely into the Muggle world while proudly rejecting the efforts of what passed for a wizarding government to push them around. The Obliviate spell was widely known, so the Statute of Secrecy was protected, but other than that, anything seemed to go. Training himself to resist using the word Mudblood proved to be a challenge, and after his second month in Sydney, Lazarus White finally broke down and purchased a used Muggle Studies textbook and got a flat in the city that actually had a television (a man had laughed in his face when he'd asked about "fellyvision" which Sirius had once assured him was what the device was called).

After six months in Horizont Alley, however, Lazarus found that city life disagreed with him. Aside from the fact that he was blowing through his reserves of galleons at an alarming rate, there were just too many people who constantly seemed to want to know where he came from. Most of them were just being friendly (he found the Austalian Muggles and wizards alike to be disturbingly gregarious compared to the Slytherins he'd grown up with), but a few seemed to think the mysterious stranger might have a secret that was valuable enough to seize by force. Luckily, Hogwarts' defense classes, while in decline, were still superior to anything available at the few small magical academies located Down Under. Still, Lazarus was inclined to relocate to someplace quieter, which happily was when he found out about Wagga Wagga.

After enjoying Christmas and New Years in Sydney (and wasn't the Muggles' fireworks show a treat!), Lazarus packed up his meager belongings and, after having the concept of "bus" explained to him, took one to the Muggle town of Wagga Wagga. Actually, Wagga Wagga was the name of *two* different towns. The Muggle Wagga Wagga was a town of about 40,000 located halfway between Sydney and Melbourne. *Magical* Wagga Wagga was actually located almost 200 miles further inland in the middle of a particularly inhospitable part of the Australian Outback. The two were connected by a permanent portkey link which connected a particular door marked "Janitorial Supplies" in the back of a Muggle petrol station to a freestanding doorway situated in the middle of the Magical Wagga Wagga's town square.

The wizarding population was nearly 200, but there was also a decent number of squibs who had been turned out by their wizarding families but who still preferred wizarding culture to Muggle. While Lazarus lacked the knowledge of

Muggle pop culture to fully appreciate it, any Muggleborn who visited the wizarding village of Wagga Wagga would have thought it was something out of an old movie Western, complete with horses, men (and women) in cowboy hats and dusters, and a saloon with swinging doors. It wasn't all like the Old West though. There were plenty of wizards and witches in contemporary Muggle clothing, as well as some in the traditional clothing he'd have expected in Diagon Alley. To his surprise, there was a motorcycle parked in front of the saloon next to two saddled horses. The sign over the saloon identified it as "*Waltzing Matilda's*," and there was a Help Wanted sign in the window.

Lazarus walked across the street from the magical doorway into the bar. It was surprisingly clean, if rustic. The ambience reminded him of the nicer bars in Knockturn Alley. Behind the bar, to Lazarus's surprise, was a beautiful young witch, seventeen at the most, with dirty blond hair and the prettiest bluest eyes he'd ever seen. She was wearing a T-shirt with the logo of the Wollongong Warriors, an Australian Quidditch team. She was also wearing distractingly short cut-off blue jeans.

"Matty! Another round!" yelled out a rough-looking local who was part of a crowd sitting at a table underneath a black-and-white television (*not a fellyvision!*) that seemed set to some Muggle sporting event. Football? Or soccer? Lazarus could never remember what it was called down here. He made his way to the bar, as "Matty" poured four beers and then levitated them over to the group with her wand. Lazarus walked up to the bar, and she smiled as he sat down. He smiled back, suddenly conscious of the fact that the face he'd adopted for "Lazarus White" was quite a bit better looking (and also a few years *older* looking) than the one he'd worn as Regulus Black.

"What'll it be, mate?" the girl asked in the omnipresent Australian twang that Lazarus had so far been unable to master.

"Just a beer," he said. "Matty, was it?"

She snorted. "Yeah, I reckon I'll answer to that if I have to, pretty boy. I prefer Matilda."

He nodded. "So the bar is named after you?"

"Ha! Other way round, actually. Mum and Dad had the bar for ten years for I showed up!" They both chuckled. "So what's your name, pretty boy."

"White," he said. "Lazarus White."

She snorted softly. "Lazarus? That's a bit morbid, isn't it? And the accent's a bit posh too! You must be one of them Brit Purebloods."

"Brit, yes. I ... don't worry too much about blood status. Do you?"

She shrugged. "Dad's a Halfblood. Mum was a Muggleborn. Not entirely sure what that makes me."

Lazarus imagined that somewhere far away, Walburga Black was screaming in horror. "Makes you a witch. That's all that matter, right? And what's wrong with *Lazarus*? It's a fine old Biblical name."

"It was a guy who *died* and then *came back from the dead*. Mum read that story to me when I was a little girl. It was supposed to be '*religiously moving*' but I just thought it was creepy."

He chuckled and took a sip of his beer. It was ... not good, but he swallowed it down. "It's a good name for second chances," he said quietly.

"Is that why you picked it?" she asked. Lazarus blushed slightly, and she laughed again. "C'mon, it's Australia, mate. Half the blokes what come in here have got different names than what they were born with."

"I suppose so." He glanced back at the sign in the window. "So what sort of help you need, Matilda?"

"Bartending. Cleaning up. Breaking up the occasional fights. Doesn't pay much, but it comes with room and board. What, you interested?"

*"Servants work," he thought. "Do they even have house elves in Australia? Still, it's out of the way, quiet, and will give me time to decide what I want to do next. Maybe a little manual labor will be good for the soul."* Lazarus pushed aside any thought that his decision to accept what was essentially a servant's position might be motivated by the blue of Matilda's eyes.

"Yeah, I think I am."

"Really?!" She seemed genuinely surprised. "I wouldn't have thought a Pureblood dressed as clean as you would be desperate enough for a job like this."

"Like I said – I'm interested in second chances. So what's your last name, Matilda?"

"MacMillan. Matilda MacMillan, at your service."

"MacMillan. I think I knew some MacMillans back in England."

She snorted softly. "I'll bet you did. They were one of those high and mighty *Ancient and Noble Houses* that run everything back there."

"Pretty sure they're just a Noble house," he said without thinking. Then, he coughed in embarrassment at the look she gave him. "So you're related to them?"

"Only by name and blood. My grandad, Jacob MacMillan was a squib. Not good enough for the ... *Noble House* of MacMillan. So when he was twelve, his folks gave him about twenty galleons worth of Muggle currency and put him on a boat to Melbourne with nothing else but the clothes on his back. He worked his way up from being a stable boy to owning this bar, married a Muggleborn witch, and they had my dad who was a full-blown wizard." The wooden doors swung open. "And speak of the devil..."

Lazarus White turned and blanched. An older, heavy-set bull of a man had just entered the saloon. Looking to be about forty or fifty, he had a thick bushy moustache and a cigar hanging out of his mouth. His clothing was a mishmash of cowboy gear, contemporary wizarding clothing (including a black fedora) ... and a brown leather duster that was identical to the ones worn by aurors back in Britain, save for the fact that the DMLE badge on his chest had an outline of Australia instead of the British Isles.

And walking along beside the man was something Lazarus had expected to see at some point but was still shocked by – a domesticated Tasmanian wolf complete with a blue bandana around her neck. When he'd first heard about Wagga Wagga, Lazarus had been told that the wizards of the region had set up a magically hidden nature preserve for the animals which had been driven nearly to extinction by Muggles. He's also been told that a handful had actually

become domesticated and had bonded with wizards as familiars. But to see such a creature in the flesh? Lazarus's eyes widened, and when the marsupial predator looked towards him and growled softly, he swallowed hard.

"G'day, luv," the big man said in a deep voice as he walked behind the bar and kissed Matilda on the cheek. "Looks like another day has passed without you burning down my bar." She gave a loud "*hmmpf*" at that and then turned to Lazarus.

"I found us a new bartender and bouncer, Dad. Allow me to introduce Lazarus White." Then, she smiled mischievously. "Though he prefers to go by *Rusty*."

Startled by his sudden rechristening, Lazarus ("Or *Rusty* now, I suppose.") almost missed the other man's introduction.

"I don't blame ya, lad, with a name like Lazarus. Pleased to meet ya, Rusty. Brian MacMillan, though most folks call me Buck."

The two men shook hands, and Rusty winced at the strength of the other man's grip. He also noticed the wand holster wrapped around the man's arm only partially hidden by his sleeve. The thylacine padded over to the young wizard and sniffed at him.

"And that there's Daisy! Don't mind her, Rusty. Her bark's worse than her bite." As if in response, "*Daisy*" opened her jaws almost ninety degrees and yawned, showing off razor-sharp teeth as she did. "Matty, you look after the bar for a spell. Daisy and I'll take young Rusty back to my office for a ... formal interview." The look in the man's eye promised questions about whether the handsome stranger would be

trustworthy around his daughter. Rusty smiled weakly, while Matilda laughed.

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## **25 December 1980**

Matilda's room at the MacMillan Homestead  
Wagga Wagga, NSW  
Midnight

"Happy Christmas, Rusty," Matilda said in a dreamy voice as she rubbed her hand across his bare chest. "It's midnight. Officially Christmas morning."

"Hmm," he said with a smile. "And I didn't get you anything."

She leaned in close and whispered. "I know something you can give me."

They both giggled at that. The two were lying together in her bed. Buck was expected to be gone until the New Year on a mission for the Auror Corps. After eleven months of constant flirting, Matilda and Rusty had consummated their very discrete relationship just a month earlier, but this was the first time they'd been together for days at a time without paternal supervision.

"You're incorrigible," he said.

"Don't pretend you're not aroused by my feminine charms, Lazarus White," she laughed.

"Liar," he replied lustily. "We both know I'm the pretty one."

She laughed again, and they leaned in together to kiss once more when there was a knock on the door. They froze.



"Merry Christmas, Matty!" Buck MacMillan exclaimed jovially from outside her bedroom door. "I hope you're having a pleasant and enjoyable holiday. Now, if it ain't too much trouble, could you send Mr. White downstairs so I might have a word with him?"

"Daddy? I don't know *what* you're insinuating?" Matilda called out loudly while Rusty rubbed his hands over his face in horror.

"Well, sweetheart, first of all, you only call me '*Daddy*' when you know you're in trouble. Second, and I think this might be even more suspicious, you and Lover Boy left all your clothes downstairs in front of the fire before you relocated to your bedroom. Rusty? You've got two minutes."

One minute and forty-five seconds later, a profoundly abashed Rusty White descended the stairs in the MacMillan home clad only in white linen sheet. By the time he arrived, Buck MacMillan was sitting comfortably in a chair next to the fire with a glass of firewhiskey in one hand and his wand in another. Rusty's own wand was laid on a table beside Buck's chair, and Daisy was resting peacefully at his feet. Rusty took a deep breath and sat down in the chair opposite his lover's angry father.

"Well now, not as fancy dressed as you were the day we first met, Rusty, but I do thank you for not coming down to face me starkers."

"Buck ... Mr. MacMillan. I am *so terribly sorry* about all this."

"About what, Rusty? Taking liberties with my daughter? Or getting caught at it?"

"Sir, I am not ... taking liberties with Matilda. Over this last year, I have come to care about her a very great deal."

"Oh have you now?! White, *she's just seventeen*. Her eighteenth birthday won't be for another three months. And how old are *you* now, eh? Twenty-five? Older? You don't call it taking liberties when you have your way with someone that much younger than you?"

Rusty buried his head in his hands. Eventually, he looked up into Buck's eyes. "I turned nineteen last June."

The man scoffed. "*Nineteen*? What kinda galah do you think I am?!"

Rusty White sighed dejectedly and then leaned back in his chair. Then, he shook his head forcefully ... and suddenly became Regulus Black once more. Buck's eyes widened in shock. Even Daisy lifted her head in surprise before yawning and returning to her former position.

"I'll be stuffed," Buck said quietly. "You're a bloody shape-shifter! A Metamorphmagus!"

"Shhh!" Regulus said urgently.

"Matty doesn't know?"

"Except for three or four relatives who were all old and may be dead by now for all I know, no one else has ever known about this. I'm only telling you because..."

Buck crooked an eyebrow, and Regulus fumed at him.

"Because I love your daughter, okay?"

Buck studied the young man's face and the emotions that played across it. "So that's why you came here from England. You'd have been conscripted if anyone ever found out. But we don't have a Conscription Act down here, lad. You don't have any reason to hide who you are and what you can do."

Regulus looked away. "That wasn't my only reason, Buck." He closed his eyes and concentrated for a few seconds, and then Regulus was gone and Rusty White was back in his place. "I wanted a new life and a fresh start. I didn't want to be ... that other person anymore. Is that so much to ask for?"

"No, son. No it's not. But the past always has a way of catching up with us. Can you promise me that your past won't catch up with my daughter?"

Rusty nodded resolutely. "Absolutely."

"In that case, there's only one thing I want to know."

Rusty braced himself for the man to ask who he really was, what awful thing he'd done that had led him halfway around the world. But that wasn't the question.

"How many Outstandings did ya get on your NEWTS?" Buck asked with an intense look on his face.

"What?!" Rusty asked, surprised.

"You *did* sit for NEWTS, right? You're a Pureblood from an old family. One with money too, I reckon. I could always tell that just from the way you talk. And I wager Daisy's favorite bone that you had a Hogwarts education. So how did ya do on your NEWTS?"

Rusty raised his chin almost defiantly. "Six NEWTS. Four Outstandings. Two Exceeds Expectations."

Buck grinned almost excitedly. "Okay then. So here's how this will go down. I will conditionally grant you permission to court my daughter, subject to the following terms. One: You treat her like a queen on a throne or else I feed you to Daisy. Two: You will *always* use Contraceptive Charms until you're married, and even afterwards until you and she know you're both ready to have kids." he took a deep breath. "And three: You apply to become an auror ."

"*What?!*" Rusty exclaimed. "I'm a nineteen-year-old expatriate bartender who fled his homeland with nothing but the clothes on his back! What the hell makes you think I'm auror material?!"

"Six NEWTS with four O's and two EE's, for a start. I've also seen how you handle the crowd at the bar when some arsehead's had too much." He grinned. "*And* I've also followed you under a disillusionment spell when you've snuck out before dawn to that little secluded spot just outside of town where you practice your dueling for an hour every morning. I know a champion-caliber duelist when I see one, and I think you've got some moves. And frankly, we need that down here. Our aurors don't get the same training as British aurors do. We're outnumbered and outwanded. *Plus* there's bunyip, Australian water vampires, yowies, and even rumors of werewolves out in the bush, on top of all the normal dark wizardry!"

"Buck!" Rusty tried to interrupt, but Buck just talked over him.

"But *most of all*, Rusty, I want *more* for my daughter than some slacker who's content to sweep the floors and pour

beer and occasionally toss out a drunken bum. I want someone *respectable* for Matilda. Is that so wrong? And does it not say something that I *have faith* that you can be that someone if you'll just get off your lazy Pureblooded arse and work at it? You're a wizard, Lazarus White. And you've got an obligation to wizarding society and to *yourself* to be the best damned wizard you can be."

"I ... I don't know, Buck. Me? An auror? You don't know where I come from. What I've done."

"No, lad. No I don't. And so long as you can promise me that it won't come back to hurt my Matilda, I'll never ask. But I think I can make at least one educated guess." He leaned forward in his chair with a look of earnest compassion in his eyes. "Rusty, between you and me – is there anything back home in England that you maybe feel like you need to ... atone for?"

Rusty's mouth gaped. "How...?"

"I'm an auror, lad. Reading people is something they'll teach you. I've known you for almost a year now. And I believe you're a good person. But you're also someone with demons that need facing."

Rusty's breath caught in his throat, and for just a moment, he saw the empty eyes of Fabian Prewitt staring up at him as if asking why he'd done nothing with his life since they'd last met. And that was followed by another image, one of a golden locket hidden away in Grimauld Place that he had sworn to destroy – an oath he'd set aside in favor of hiding like a child in a foreign land. Buck was right. He *did* have things to atone for, and maybe becoming an auror would teach him what he would need to know to destroy Voldemort's horcrux for good.

"Alright. How do I start?"

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***2 November 1981***

***Rusty White's Room above the Waltzing Matilda***

**DARK LORD VOLDEMORT BELIEVED DEAD.  
JIM POTTER PRONOUNCED "BOY-WHO-LIVED."  
BRITISH MINISTRY BEGINS TO REBUILD.**

Rusty stared at the headline in astonishment. It was not a banner headline. In fact, it was buried on page four of the Uluru Gazette, which, like most wizarding newspapers in the former British colonies resolutely underplayed the importance of anything that happened in "the Old Country." Apparently, the Dark Lord had sought to murder James Potter and his family only to somehow be slain by the magic of Potter's younger son. Well, for some values of "slain" – Rusty knew and was likely the only one who knew that the Dark Lord was immortal until his horcrux was destroyed.

*"I just hope Sirius is okay," the young auror trainee thought idly. "Ah, who am I kidding? He's probably debauching himself in celebration with a case of Firewhiskey and as many lovers as his bed can hold at one time."*

Sighing to himself, Rusty put the paper aside and returned to the textbook on memory charms he was reviewing. He had an exam on the topic in than two days, and he planned to ace it.

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***1 August 1982***

***Australian DMLE HQ***

Lazarus White held himself stiffly at attention along with three of his cohorts as the Australian Minister of Magic, a

severe witch named Beatrice Kemper, walked down the line, handing off a badge to each one in turn and then shaking the new auror's hand, turning as she did so that the photographer could get a picture of each cadet's induction. Australia did not have an Auror Academy as such – the population was too small and too spread out for a dedicated academy. Instead, each recruit who passed the fairly grueling entrance exams was assigned to a succession of senior aurors, six in all, who each oversaw his or her student for a month-long master-apprentice relationship. At the end of the six-month rotation, the cadet had one final month of physical training and exit exams before being approved by the Ministry and awarded a badge, a wand holster, and a magically armored long coat.

Rusty's auror companions all wanted to go out for the night to celebrate – "paint Horizont Alley purple," as Jack Cornwallis had said – but Rusty begged off. His first rotation had been with Buck learning the basics about law enforcement in Wagga Wagga, but after that, his next five rotations had carried him the length and breadth of Australia, followed by one final month spent in the barracks at DMLE headquarters in Sydney. In short, six long months since he'd spent any time with Matilda longer than a Floo call. And so, he declined the offer of a pub crawl, although he did find time to stop off in one particular jewelry store in Horizont Alley.

That night, when Matilda got home from the saloon, she arrived to a home-cooked romantic dinner for two. Delighted, she rushed into Rusty's arms and kissed him passionately. As they ate, she peppered him with questions about what auror training had been like, and he asked her questions about the happenings of Wagga Wagga in his absence. But despite his happiness and their amiable chatter, Rusty was nervous, and Matilda noticed.

"Rusty, what's the matter? This should be a joyous day for you. But you're all tense and edgy. What's on your mind?"

He took a deep breath. "Matilda... there's something I need to tell you." She looked at him expectantly. "It's ... it's about my past ... and I guess my present too."

Pushing down his fear of rejection, he shook his head violently, and for the first time since the previous Christmas, Lazarus "Rusty" White was replaced by a nervous-looking Regulus Black. Matilda just stared at him.

"How the hell did'ya do that?!" she finally exclaimed.

"Well," he replied. "I'm a Metamorphmagus. My real name is Regulus Black."

She nodded. He hesitated and then coughed nervously before continuing.

"Of the, ah, Ancient and Noble House of Black."

She crooked an eyebrow at that. "Are we related?" she asked suspiciously.

"No! Of course not... Well, I mean ... *distantly*?"

"*How* distantly?"

"I'm pretty sure your grandfather and my grandmother were first cousins."

She exhales. "Okay, I think I can live with that." Then, she gave him an oddly appraising look.

"So you're a Metamorphmagus, then?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"



"Not at all. I'm actually pleased to see that you're only prettier than me because of an unfair advantage. So can you look like whoever you please?"

"Within reason. I have some limits based on body size and mass. Why?"

"Can you do Mel Gibson?"

"What? That Muggle from the *Mad Max* movie you took me to see?"

"He was also in *Gallipoli*! He's a serious actor!"

He pursed his lips and concentrated, and with a slight popping sound, Regulus Black became a perfect copy of Mel Gibson, the current Australian movie heartthrob.

"Ooooh," she cooed. "This is going to make our after-dinner activities *very* interesting!"

"*Matilda!*" he exclaimed, instantly shifting back into his true form, which was now blushing furiously. "I'm ... I'm not a *piece of meat!*"

She laughed and pulled him into an embrace. "I'm just *teasing*, Rusty. Or Regulus. Or whoever you want to be today. Now why did you suddenly decide to tell me all this?"

"Because I don't want there to be any secrets between us. I don't want you to feel later that I might have misled you or something. And if it's all the same, I'd rather you call me Rusty." He shifted back into the form of Lazarus White, the form that now felt more comfortable than his original skin ever had. Then, he dropped down to one knee and removed a jewelry box from his coat pocket.

"Matilda MacMillan, will you marry me?"

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***5 November 1983***

***Headline of the Uluru Gazette***

**WEREWOLF PACK ATTACKS MAGICAL  
COMMUNITIES NEAR PERTH.  
SURVIVORS SPEAK OF HORRORS THEY ENDURED.  
MINISTRY URGES CALM.**

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**16 May 1984**

**The newly built home of Lazarus and Matilda White  
Wagga Wagga, NSW**

"Altair?"

"No."

"Aries?"

"No."

"Castor?"

"Good God, no!"

"Corvus?"

"No. Why are we doing this again?"

Rusty sighed and put down the list he'd written. "Look, I may not be an active member of my family – and you may not care about any stuffy old Pureblood traditions anyway – but the fact remains that our son will be descended from the Ancient and Noble House of Black, and it is a tradition in my family that we name children after stars and

constellations. He may someday need to draw upon the resources of House Black, and I think it might ... smooth the wheels if he had a name that showed our respect for my lineage."

"Uh-huh," said Matilda with a dubious expression. The young Mrs. White, who was now four months into her pregnancy, was leaning back in a recliner while reading a magazine about motorcycle repair. "Didn't you say your parents were crazy and used to abuse you and your brother *and* said brother hates you because you used to be a bigoted Pureblood wanker?"

"I'm pretty sure I've never used the word *wanker* to describe *myself*," Rusty said testily.

"Well, of course not, sweetie. You're far too polite for such honesty. And anyway, no offense, pretty boy, but I don't think I want your crazy mother anywhere near our future baby boy."

"But you're okay with him going to Hogwarts? Right?" Rusty said, suddenly anxious. "I mean, it's the most prestigious magical school in the world and as a Black, he's guaranteed to get in!"

She sighed. "Yes, yes! I know all about Hoggy Warty Hogwarts and how important it is for our offspring to get in. I won't *like it* when our son moves off at *eleven* to spend nine months out of the year on the opposite side of the bleeding planet, but I'm ... okay with it. But I *still* don't see what that means we have to name the poor tyke after some blessed heavenly body."

"It's like I said, love. Tradition! Now then – Draco!"

"What?!"

"Draco. It's a constellation near Hercules. It's named after Ladon, the dragon who guarded the Apples of the Hesperides."

"If I ever met someone who named their child *Draco*, I would call Child Services! And before you ask, *no, we will not name our son Hercules either!*"

Rusty cleared his throat and looked down at his list.  
"Fornax?"

"No!"

"Herc – I mean, Hydrus?"

"NO!"

"Indus?"

"*NO!*"

"Leo?"

"... Leo." Matilda paused, her mounting anger at her husband temporarily forgotten. "Leo White. Leo Brian White. I think I could live with that."

"Leo *Brian* White?" Now it was Rusty's turn to sound dubious. Matilda narrowed her eyes.

"Surely, *dear*, you're not suggesting that we should *only* use names from *your* side of the family, are you?" she asked frostily.

"No! No, not at all. Leo Brian White is *perfect*." Rusty smiled winningly at his wife, who went back to her magazine.

*"We'll just tell everyone that Brian is the name of a Constellation in the Southern Hemisphere," he muttered under his breath.*

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**4 July 1984**  
**From the Uluru Gazette**

### **WEREWOLVES AT LARGE IN MELBOURNE!**

*At least four wizards and witches were killed yesterday and another fifteen seriously injured in a daring daylight assault on the Golightly Travel Agency in Unuzyu Alley marketplace in Melbourne, Victoria. The attackers are believed to have been members of a nomadic werewolf pack led by Eustace and Clarence Tully, wizards and brothers who contracted lycanthropy in the early 1970s. Although the werewolves were not fully transformed as it was still daylight, all seven of the pack members were partially transformed at the time of the attack. Exactly how the Tully gang was able to penetrate into the heart of Unuzyu Alley is unknown, but anonymous sources at the DMLE note that two or more of the gang members are wizards and are thus likely able to apparate themselves and presumably side-apparate their comrades. These sources furthermore expressed concern in light of the fact that two witches and one wizard (Mr. and Mrs. George Golightly and their employee, Rose Abernathy) were missing after the attack. All three are licensed portkey artificers, and while it is possible the three simply portkeyed to safety, authorities are concerned that the Tully gang may soon have new members who are able to make portkeys at will.*

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**25 July 1984**  
**The home of Lazarus and Matilda White**

## Wagga Wagga, NSW

Rusty and Matilda were sitting at breakfast when, to their mild surprise, an enormous silver rabbit about the size of a dog appeared on their kitchen table. Their surprise was only mild because both of them were familiar with Big Jake, Buck MacMillan's Patronus which for some reason took the form of a Flemish Giant Rabbit.

"Rusty!" said the rabbit. "I know it's your off day, but we need ya to come in. We gotta line on one of the Tully gang, and your our best man for a fight against a dark creature. Meet us at apparation coordinates 260.50 by 113.09 by 4.00, ASAP. Get Matty to send a response so we can know when to expect you."

The rabbit faded away, and Rusty frowned before looking up at his wife. "Would you mind?" he asked.

"Not at all. But when are you going to master the Patronus yourself?"

"I'm working on it! I can do the ... the foggy part of it!"

"Oh Rusty! Have ... have I not made you *happy*, my love?" she asked with mock sadness.

"Very funny. Now send the message, please?"

She laughed and then summoned her own meerkat Patronus to convey a response to Buck. When she was done though, Matilda turned serious.

"Be careful, pretty boy. Werewolves are *dangerous*."

"That's why I need to leave *now* so we can catch the bastard before That Old Devil Moon comes out." He bent over to

kiss his wife and headed for the Floo.

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### ***Later that evening in Horizont Alley...***

The good news was that the tip had paid off. A squad consisting of Rusty, Buck (accompanied by Daisy), and three other aurors (Cornwallis, Ogden, and Nguyen) had found a member of the Tully gang as he was apparently casing a shop in Horizont Alley that sold portkeys, and they'd managed to lock down the whole neighborhood with anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards. The bad news was that the gang member was actually Clarence Tully, who was a fairly skilled wizard backed up by the raw physical power of a half-transitioned werewolf, and he had evaded capture in the labyrinthine alleys and warehouses of Horizont Alley. In the course of pursuing him, the aurors had already come across three corpses plus one seriously injured man who'd already been sent to hospital and put under observation to see if he'd contracted lycanthropy. The *even worse* news was that tonight was a full moon, and if they couldn't capture and incapacitate Tully before 5:45 p.m., he was at risk of fully changing in the middle of the largest wizarding community in Australia.

They'd finally tracked their quarry to a warehouse full of tall shelves stacked with boxes and crates when they realized the *worst* news. Apparently, the auror who'd been responsible for finding out the time for moonrise had botched the job. Rusty rounded the corner just as Clarence let out a scream of pain accompanied by a cracking noises as all of his joints popped at once and several of his bones spontaneously snapped and reformed into new shapes. Rusty fired off his most powerful Stunner, but Clarence moved like lightning and dodged the spell. Then, he leaped up and scaled the ceiling high shelves in three bounds,

pulling himself up and over the side. Rusty put his back to the shelves, grasped his wand in both hands, and pointed it at the ground.

"***VENTUS!***" A powerful blast of air shot out of his wand and propelled him up to the top of the shelves. He grabbed the top edge and pulled himself up. Clarence was already jumping from shelf to shelf, easily covering the ten-foot gap between each one, a feat that Rusty couldn't possibly match. Taking in his surroundings, he pointed his wand at a ceiling beam just above the shelf ahead of Clarence.

"***CARPE RETRACTUM!***" A strong rope shot out of his wand and wrapped itself around the beam. Rusty yanked, and then the rope, which was still attached to the top of his wand, retracted and jerked him through the air until he released the spell and dropped onto the shelf below just as the werewolf landed on it. But by then, the transformation was nearly complete. Clarence Tully's rippling muscles tore through the seams of his clothes, sprouting shaggy black fur as they did, and there was a horrifying crack as his jawbone extended into a wolf's snout. The werewolf threw back his head and howled ... and Rusty almost panicked as unholy unnatural terror washed over him like a black wave. He managed not to piss himself or void his bowels, but in his fear he took a step back.

Right off the top of the thirty-foot-tall shelf.

He screamed as he fell, only to stop halfway down and then float down quickly the rest of the way thanks to a Levitation Spell from Jack Cornwallis, who'd been Rusty's best mate during training. Rusty barely had time to yell out his thanks before an angry Tully leaped down from shelf onto Cornwallis, knocking him to the ground. Rusty could only watch in horror as the werewolf started tearing at the



screaming auror's flesh. The screaming was suddenly cut short as Tully bit down on the auror's throat and tore it out. Pulling himself together, Rusty fired off his most powerful Stunner, but it had absolutely no effect. The rest of the aurors had arrived by now, but their spells were equally ineffective against a fully transformed werewolf.

The creature let out another howl, and while Rusty literally shook with terror, he managed to control himself. Odgen and Nguyen were less poised, and they turned tail and ran in a panic. By that point, Rusty and Buck had the werewolf in a crossfire, and they had both resorted to borderline dark spells, mainly Bludgeoning Hexes, but to no avail. Each hex would visibly shatter one of the werewolf's limbs, but they would reset themselves and heal within seconds. They were causing the creature terrible pain but not really slowing it down. Suddenly, Tully reached out with an enormous clawed hand, grabbed a heavy crate, and hurled it towards Buck. The impact knocked the older man down to the ground and stunned him. Tully quickly started towards Buck to finish the auror. Daisy interposed herself between the two, barking furiously the whole time. But before Tully could reach them, the werewolf howled in pain once more when Rusty shot it in the back with an Incendio. The flames did no significant damage beyond scorching off the fur on its back, but it definitely caught the beast's attention. Tully turned and with a snarl began running towards Rusty as fast as the beast could. When Tully was less than twenty feet away, Rusty fired off the most lethal spell he knew that wasn't Unforgivable: Dolohov's Entrail-Expelling Curse.

**"EXVISCERA!"** The dark curse hit Clarence Tully dead in the chest, and immediately, a two-foot-long gash opened across his mid-section out of which the werewolf's intestines tumbled. Tully howled in pain once more but continued advancing towards Rusty albeit a bit slower. To

the auror's amazement, the werewolf even seemed to be regenerating from near-disembowelment, as his organs were slowly being sucked back up into his stomach cavity and the thick gash was already healing itself. Tully lunged, and at the last second, Rusty threw up a *Protego* spell.

Tully landed on top of the shield, and the sheer weight and force of the impact knocked Rusty to the ground. The pain of maintaining the shield soon became excruciating, but just as Rusty was about to lose his shield and become vulnerable, Tully howled again in pain. He backed away from Rusty and spun around wildly, and Rusty saw why: Daisy was on his back, and her powerful bone-crushing jaws were clamped down on the back of his neck as she tried to snap his spine. Unfortunately, she only lasted a few seconds before Tully reached around, pulled her loose, and hurled her against a nearby brick wall with enough force to crack the brickwork, but that was enough time for Rusty to catch his breath and climb to his feet.

Tully whirled around to face Rusty once more, but the auror was ready. He ducked under the werewolf's grasping arms, darted forward, and jammed his wand-hand *inside* the rapidly closing wound left by the Entrail-Expelling Curse all the way up to his elbow.

**"*INCENDIO MAXIMUM!*"** he cried out in a righteous fury. Instantly, the werewolf went rigid and began to convulse as flames as hot as any blow torch set fire to his lungs and heart before pouring up his throat. The werewolf threw its head back, but no howl came forth. Instead, blue flames shot out of its mouth straight up ten feet in the air. Then, it was Rusty's turn to scream, as the now-boiling liquids inside the werewolf's chest cavity poured down onto his hand, burning it. Finally, the werewolf fell backwards to the floor. Rusty staggered back, tears of pain pouring down his

cheeks from the third-degree burns that covered his wand hand. Within seconds, Buck was by his side to cast healing charms.

"NEVER MIND MY BLOODY HAND! MAKE SURE THAT BASTARD IS *DEAD!*" Rusty bellowed.

Grimacing, Buck turned towards the still smoldering werewolf and cast a diagnostic spell.

"Dead as a dodo, Rusty. Good work. Now *shut up*, and let me heal your bloody hand!"

Seconds later, Rusty's hand, while still tender, was mostly healed. Then, he turned as Buck gasped in shock. Some twenty feet away, Daisy was lying still against the brick wall into which she'd been hurled. The two aurors raced to her side, but she was already gone. Buck was heartbroken.

"My Daisy," he said softly as he stroked her matted fur. "My beautiful Daisy."

"I'm so sorry, Buck," Rusty said softly. "She saved my life."

"Course she did," Buck said with a sniff. "She was a good girl."

Rusty put his hand on his father-in-law's shoulder and squeezed.

"That she was, Buck. That she was."

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***26 July 1984***  
***From the Uluru Gazette***

**WEREWOLF CLARENCE TULLY SLAIN IN DUEL WITH  
AURORS.**

**AUROR LAZARUS WHITE TO RECEIVE  
COMMENDATION.**

Below the headline was a picture of Lazarus White from Wagga Wagga NSW accepting a handshake and a medal for "Exceptional Bravery" from the head of the DMLE. White looked like an auror posterboy in his formal robes with his perfect hair slicked back and his pearly grin shining out of the picture. In the interview, White was modest and genial, giving thanks to his fellow auror and father-in-law Brian "Buck" MacMillan (also of Wagga Wagga) for his assistance, as well as that Auror Jack Cornwallis, who was sadly slain by the rampaging werewolf, and even MacMillan's familiar, a police-trained Tazmanian Wolf named Daisy who tragically died in the fight against the werewolf. According to the article, there was to be a memorial service in Jack Cornwallis's honor in two days time. In addition, Daisy will be honored with a plaque at DMLE headquarters on a wall designated for auror familiars who have displayed exceptional heroism in defense of their masters and wizarding society. In his interview, White had downplayed his own heroism, stating that he was proud to serve the Australian people and to have a chance to protect his community and especially his family. The reporter congratulated White on his recent marriage and on the upcoming birth of his first child.

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***26 July 1984***

***Terrawanda (an abandoned ghost town located deep in the Outback)***

In an ramshackle building hundreds of miles away, a black inch-long talon delicately punched a hole through the top of

Lazarus White's picture and then neatly sliced along the top of it, down, across and back up again. The talon's owner carried the picture over to a nearby wall and carefully affixed it with thumbtacks in each corner. Next to it was a map of New South Wales with the location of Magical Wagga Wagga circled in red.

"I know how you feel, Auror White," Eustace Tully said in a raspy unpleasant voice. "Family's important to me too."

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## **20 November 1984**

The home of Lazarus, Matilda & Leo White  
Wagga Wagga, NSW  
2:00 a.m.

The sound of the baby crying woke both Rusty and Matilda almost at the same time. Matilda started to crawl out of bed, but Rusty stopped her.

"No, no," he said with a loud yawn. "You went last time. It's Daddy's turn."

She nodded gratefully and went back to sleep. Rusty pulled on his bathrobe (he jammed his wand into the robe's pocket in case any diaper-changing charms were needed) and staggered to the nursery still half asleep. Barely one month old, Leo was crying up a storm, but his diaper was still dry. Rusty yawned again and then sat down with the baby in the rocking chair next to the crib and began rocking while singing a soft lullaby. Gradually, Leo calmed down and fell back to sleep. Rusty looked down into his sleeping son's face and smiled. For a moment, he tried to recall where he'd heard the lullaby he just sang. Surely neither Orion nor Walburga would ever have sung a lullaby to him! And then, he remembered - it had been Kreacher. Just as it had

been Kreacher who'd practically raised him while his mother and father descended into madness.

As Rusty continued to look down at Leo, he absent-mindedly wiped his face with his free hand and was surprised to realize that he'd been crying. It took him a second to realize why. He had a son. He had a wonderful wife, a home, and a son who would not be raised by a house elf in a four-story mausoleum but by two parents who loved him unconditionally. That Regulus Black could have come from being torn at by inferi at the bottom of freezing lake to reach this moment seemed impossible, a miracle of unimaginable proportions. And Regulus Lazarus Rusty White Black realized that he was weeping over his baby boy in a nursery at 2:00 a.m. because he was so happy it felt like his heart might break from joy.

Carefully, Rusty put the sleeping babe back in his crib and turned for the door. Then, he stopped and thought some more about the epiphany he'd just had. He took one more look at the crib, and then, with a dopey grin on his face, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the middle of the room.

**"EXPECTO PATRONUM,"** he whispered. The familiar glow of the Patronus Charm filled the room before collapsing into the brilliant form of a Tasmanian wolf. Rusty's grin grew even broader.

"Hello, Daisy."

---

**13 April 1985**  
**DMLE HQ, Sydney**  
**Friday the 13th**

It had been a long week for Rusty White. On Monday, he'd had to perform his first Tabula Rasa, the total memory wipe spell that Wizarding Australia used to "psychically execute" criminals convicted of capital crimes. Death of Personality as they called it. And while it was definitely better than sending criminals to languish in Azkaban, it was still unsettling to cast a spell on someone and cause them to forget their entire lives. When the appeals ran out and it came time to carry out the sentence, aurors on site drew lots to see who would carry out the sentence, and on Monday, it had been Rusty's turn. He'd been required to swear an Unbreakable Oath to only ever use the spell as part of a lawful judicial sentence before he was allowed to even learn the Tabula Rasa spell.

Well, sort of, anyway. Because he wasn't *really* Lazarus White, the oath he swore didn't take, but since the oath was administered by his father-in-law who knew his secret and was willing to help keep it, no one really cottoned onto the fact. Buck *did* pull him aside and threaten a horrible beat down if he ever misused the Tabula Rasa Curse (which itself was a crime that carried a penalty of personality death), and Rusty reassured the man that, of course, he wouldn't. After Rusty carried out the sentence, healers took the now mindless criminal (formerly Mortimer Travers, a British expat and probably a former Death Eater) away to a special facility where he would be given new memories and a new face before being reintegrated into Magical Australia, hopefully as a less awful person.

After that, Rusty had been on edge all week leading up to today, Friday the 13th. Naturally, it was also a full moon, so he was expecting weirdness. He was *not* expecting Horizont Alley to burst into flames. Starting at four o'clock that afternoon, explosions rocked the small magical community, and every auror was called to active duty. By seven, Rusty

had sent his Patronus Daisy to let Matilda know he would be late and to not wait up. By ten, he'd been to see Healers twice for injuries. Finally, just before midnight, they'd caught a suspect, a lower class wizard named Edgar Farnaby who'd had a history of magical arson-for-hire. He was caught red-handed leaving the scene of one of the fires. Rusty still had a fresh bandage on his off-hand when he got to the interrogation room.

"Here's your authorization for the use of Veritaserum, White," said Nguyen as she handed him some papers.

"Me? Why isn't MacMillan handling this? He's the ranking auror."

"Which is why he's the one delivering a report as we speak to the Minister and her cabinet. He sent word that you're in charge until he and the other seniors get back."

Rusty scowled at that. He just wanted to be an auror, but sometimes he wondered if Buck was "grooming him for greater things" or some such bullshit. He took the file and reviewed it. Then, he, Nguyen, and the Ministry official assigned to administer the truth serum entered the interrogation room where Farnaby was waiting, handcuffed to an immobile chair and with a Silencio spell blocking the sound of whatever obscenities he was shouting towards them. Rusty sat down at the chair opposite, organized his papers on the small desk, and tapped a small glass globe with his wand.

"Recording commences. Auror Lazarus White speaking. It is Friday, April 13, 1985 and the time is 23:45. We are convened to take the Veritaserum testimony of suspected arsonist Edgar Farnaby. Also present are Auror Nguyen Park and Mediwizard Frank Burnside. I have before me



a *Writ of Permission to Use Veritaserum* signed by Chief Auror Woolsey, DMLE Director Scott, and Magistrate Judge Ezra Mattingly. Mediwizard Burnside, please proceed."

The Mediwizard stepped forward and waved his wand in a complicated pattern over the belligerent suspect. A number of sigils appeared in the air above Farnaby. Burnside nodded and gestured with his wand, and the sigils floated through the air to manifest as markings on a blank piece of parchment in front of White.

"Let the record reflect," said Mediwizard Burnside, "that I have performed a Level 3 diagnostic charm on the suspect, the results of which have been transcribed for the file. Mr. Farnaby is in good health and has no apparent allergy to any of the components of Veritaserum. Based on his size and weight, it is my professional opinion that three drops of Veritaserum may be administered for an interrogation period of up to seven minutes without any harm to the suspect."

"So noted," said White.

Burnside then pointed his wand at Farnaby's head. "**ABIERTONGUE.**" At that, Farnaby's mouth shot open and his tongue flopped out. He was otherwise immobilized. Burnside pulled out a stopper and placed three drops of Veritaserum on the man's tongue and tilted his head back. Then, he released the man from his bindings. Already, Farnaby's eyes were becoming glassy. Burnside checked his pocket watch, and after twenty seconds, he removed the Silencing spell from the man.

"The Veritaserum has taken effect. Seven minutes of interrogation will commence now, after which the antidote will be given." He nodded to White.

"What is your name?" White said, addressing the prisoner.

"Edgar Farnaby," he replied in a dreamy voice.

"What is your address?"

"218C Beekman Way, Horizont Alley, Sydney."

"Are you the same Edgar Farnaby who was convicted of arson in 1973, 1977, and 1980?"

"Yes."

"Did you have any connection to the fires that were set earlier this afternoon and this evening in Horizont Alley?"

"Yes, I set them all."

"Why?"

"I was paid to."

"By whom?"

"I dunno. Scary guy. Showed up in my room but stayed in the shadows. Left me a bag with 100 galleons, promised me more if I started a bunch of fires tonight. Also promised to eat me for dinner if I said no."

White looked up sharply from the legal pad he was using to take notes.

"Did he assign the buildings to be burned?"

"No. Told me to use my best judgment. Just so long as all the aurors were tied up tonight."

White and Nguyen looked at each other.

"Clarify," said White urgently. "The man who hired you did so for the *purpose* of distracting the Sydney DMLE? And specifically tonight?"

"Yeah, but not just them. He wanted enough fires to ensure that all the off-duty aurors got pulled in from the outlying communities."

White's blood suddenly ran cold. "Why?"

"He wouldn't say exactly. He just said it was a *family matter*."

*Eat me for dinner. Full moon tonight. Family matter. Matilda!*

White jumped up out of his chair, nearly knocking the table over.

"Get Buck!" he roared. "Tell him to get to Wagga Wagga immediately with as much reinforcements as he can get!"

"Rusty, what's...?"

"*DO IT!*" With that, White ran out of the interrogation room and bolted up two flights of stairs to the Staging Room, a circular room with doors labeled with the names of every wizarding community in Australia. He opened the door marked "*Wagga Wagga*" and stepped through with his wand drawn.

He exited into the town square of Wagga Wagga, with Buck's field office behind him and the Waltzing Matilda in front. The doors of the saloon had been ripped off their hinges and a window had been broken in. Lying on the ground in front of the saloon was the bloody corpse of Bill Freeland, the squib bartender Matilda had hired as his

replacement when he started auror training. Bill's left arm was lying on the ground about ten feet away. His right leg was missing altogether. Looking up and down the street, he could hear the sounds of the dying and smell the spilled blood of the already dead. He quickly apparated home.

When Rusty arrived, his breath caught in his throat. The front door to the house had been ripped off its hinges. Struggling to control his panic, Rusty crept into the darkened house. The furniture in the living room and kitchen had been broken to pieces. Carefully, with his wand hand shaking, he crept up the stairs. There were no sounds of any movement (perhaps a good sign, he tried to tell himself, since werewolves were not known for subtlety). The first door on the left was Leo's nursery, and the door was open. Bracing himself, Rusty whirled into the room with his wand drawn only to freeze at the sight. The rocking chair and changing table were smashed, there were bloody claw marks on the walls, the crib was in pieces, and ...

and...

and...

and...

and...

Rusty's mind nearly shut down, unable to process the scene before him. His knees started to buckle, and his breath was short. His chest burned as if the sight of his world collapsing around him would cause his heart to burst into flame just like Clarence Tully's had. Then, just as he was on the verge of breaking down completely, he heard a sound, a very soft cough, coming from farther down the hall. He turned and staggered away from

*don't think about Leo*

*don't think about Leo*

*don't think about Leo*

to the master bedroom. There, he let out an incoherent cry as he saw Matilda's torn and broken body laying on the floor in a pool of blood. The broken fragments of her wand was on the floor just a few feet from the bleeding stump where her wandhand had been. And yet somehow, she was *alive*. Perhaps only for seconds, but she was *alive*. He knelt beside her and gingerly picked her up into an embrace.

"*Rus... ty*," she gasped, her every sound a ragged whisper. Her eyes were closed, yet somehow she recognized her lover's touch.

"I'm here, love. I *-sniff-* I'm here. Just ... just stay calm. Help's coming."

That was a lie, of course. There was no help coming from anywhere for wounds this severe.

"*Is -cough- is ... Leo ... o...okay?*"

Rusty opened his mouth, but the words froze in his throat. He felt like he was being strangled. And then, from deep inside, he heard or perhaps felt a voice. One that sounded like Buck and a bit like Auntie Cassiopeia and, strangely, a little bit like Albus Dumbledore. And that voice whispered.

"*Be kind, Regulus Lazarus Rusty White Black. The woman you love is dying in your arms. Be strong enough to give her peace.*"

He took a deep breath. "Leo's fine, Matty. He's ... he's safe. They never got near him. He's perfectly ... safe."

She sighed. "*I knew you'd come... pretty ... boy. I ... knew you'd ... save ... our son.*" And with those words, Rusty's heart broke a little more.

"Yeah, luv -sniff- I saved him. Our l-little Leo will grow up big and strong and ... and be an *auror* someday. Just like his Dad and Grandad. But ... he'll also be ... be kind and caring and clever and *oh so* good-looking. Just -sniff- just like his Mum."

"*Liar...*" she said softly. He looked down suddenly in shock at what he thought was an accusation, but then she opened her eyes as if to grace him with one last look at them.

"*We ... both know... you're the pretty...*"

And then, the light in the prettiest bluest eyes he'd ever seen went out forever. Rusty was sure he felt something, her soul perhaps, pass through him. It felt as though it was taking every last bit of his happiness with it as it fled. He gripped her broken body tightly and shook with silent heaving sobs as her blood soaked through his shirt. Then, finally, when he could sob no more, Rusty threw his head back and *screamed* into the night.

No mere werewolf had ever howled with such pain and fury.

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***14 April 1984***  
***From the Uluru Gazette***

**MASSACRE AT WAGGA WAGGA!  
MORE THAN 20 DEAD! INCLUDING FAMILY  
OF STAR AUROR LAZARUS WHITE!**

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**13 May 1984**

***From the Uluru Gazette***

**TULLY GANG ATTACKS MAGICAL COMMUNITY IN  
ADELAIDE!**

**FIFTEEN DEAD! DOZENS INJURED! SEVERAL TAKEN  
AWAY!**

**WEREWOLVES HAVE ACCESS TO PORTKEYS!  
IS ANY WIZARDING SETTLEMENT SAFE?**

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**15 June 1985**

***Terrawanda***

"Eustace!" the girl whined. "I'm *hungry*!"

"You'll eat soon enough, Rose," said Eustace Tully almost indulgently. "Just as soon as you finish that portkey. Then, we'll feast on the fat juicy wizardfolk of Unuzya Alley. Same drill as last time brothers and sisters. We wait until two minutes before moonrise and then portkey in. Take what we want. Kill what we want. And then we're out. The reverse portkeys will bring us back here after an hour of hunting."

With that, he jingled the necklace that served as a timed reverse portkey. Everyone in the pack wore one, and they were enchanted to stay on and grow with the werewolf during the change.

"Oh, and if possible, bring some food back to the larder. We're running a might low." Several pack members grunted their assent. George Golightly merely shrugged and returned to gnawing on his favorite femur. Some tiny part of him recalled that it used to belong to his wife back before the pack brought the Golightlys and their young employee

Rose here. That had been almost a year before, back when he'd still been a prey animal himself instead of the predator he quickly became. His wife had not adapted so well, and so they'd eaten her in short order, but he still kept her femur as a memento and also a chew toy.

"Alright, Eustace," said Rose cheerfully. "It's ready." On the table in front of her was a long braided rope which would also serve as the portkey to take them all a secluded rooftop in the wizarding village that was hidden in the heart of Melbourne. There, they would await the Change and then feast until the reverse-portkeys brought them home. She could hardly wait. Except for a few Muggle hitchhikers, the pack had not eaten man-flesh since the last full moon.

"Right then," said Eustace to the group. "If you're wearing anything you'd rather not see shredded, better shuck 'em now." The werewolves began to strip. The shy ones kept their underwear on, or even more, but most of the pack was nude when the chime alarm on Eustace's pocket watch said it was time. He placed the watch down next to his wand.

"Alright, everybody get ready. Grab on to the rope. Dinner is served!"

But to everyone's surprise, the appointed time came and went, and the portkey didn't work. Eustace looked at Rose angrily, and the girl quailed at his expression.

"It wasn't my fault, Eustace! Honest it wasn't!"

George walked over, still idly gnawing on his late wife's femur out of habit. He picked his wand up off the table and cast a spell. Then, he looked to his alpha in concern.

"Anti-portkey ward, Eustace! Anti-apparation, too!"



At that exact moment, there was a crash as Lazarus White kicked in the door and stepped into the shack, his wand already drawn. He said nothing at first, merely taking in the room with a hateful glare.

"Well, well, well," said Eustace. "Lazarus White, I reckon. We've never met face-to-face, but I've still got your picture on my wall. How's your family, Lazarus?"

Lazarus held up his wand. "How's yours? Oh wait, I remember. He screamed as he burned."

The other pack members rose and arranged themselves in a line, growling angrily at Lazarus as they did.

"He was one, lawman," said Eustace with a sneer. Then, he jerked suddenly, as several of his bones began to crack and his fingers began to stretch. The others began to change as well. "We *-ah-* are many! Plus *-hurk-* moonsign is upon us *-hurk-* boy. The Change has started. You *really* should have come earlier if you wanted to do this. And also brought a bloody army!"

"I wanted to see you change, Tully. I want to kill you as you really are."

Tully and the other werewolves laughed at that, even as some of them began to snarl and moan through the agonizing transformation into their lupine forms.

"You're *that big a fool*, White?!" Tully snarled, his voice deepening into a growl. "You think you got a spell in that stick that can take out a dozen transformed werewolves before we eat you alive?"

The auror lifted his chin defiantly. "Yeah, I've got one." And with that, he whirled his wand around over his head before

bring it down in a slash. "**FIENDFYRE!**"

And Hell came to Terrawanda.

Students of the Dark Arts know that some spells, most notably the Killing Curse and the Cruciatus Curse require that the caster truly *hate* someone. It need not be the person targeted by the spell when it is actually cast, but the wizard must have *someone* who he truly hates enough to see dead or tortured, respectively, for either spell to be successfully cast on any target. Such an emotion is inadequate for Fiendfyre, however. It is one of the few spells for which the spells's name and its effect are synonymous, for there is almost no danger of accidentally casting it due to its rare and difficult esoteric requirements. It is not enough to hate someone or something to cast Fiendfyre. The wizard must hate someone or something so much that *any amount of collateral damage is acceptable* if it means destroying the object of his hatred. It means that the wizard would be happy to *die himself* if he can only see the object of his hatred be annihilated first. Of course, the wizard doesn't need to die to cast Fiendfyre, only be *willing* to do so. Which, at the moment, Rusty White absolutely was.

The spell hit the floor in the dead center of the assembled werewolves, and the unholy laughing flames erupted right underneath them all. White quickly took three steps back and pointed his wand at the open door, putting as much magic as he could spare into the spell. "**COLLOPORTUS TRIMENDIUM!**" The Three-Fold Locking Spell surrounded the entire shack. In the blink of an eye, the front door slammed shut, and then all the doors and all the windows were sealed shut and locked by the spell. Once that was done, Lazarus White apparated back fifty feet from the shack to watch as the flames started to rise and listen as

the screams turned into angry impotent howls. After about ten seconds, the flames had damaged the door to the point that it was no longer structurally sound enough to support the locking charm. It was at that point that Eustace Tully, now fully transformed, blasted through the door with his body. The werewolf was still on fire and was not long for this world, but right now, he was fueled by pure hate. He and Lazarus locked eyes, and then, with a mighty howl, Tully began running towards him on all fours. Lazarus simply pointed his wand at the approaching werewolf.

As Tully drew nearer, Lazarus suddenly recalled one of the last nights he'd been Regulus Black, when his hatred for Dolohov and Rosier and all the rest had been enough to fuel the Killing Curse that ended the life of Fabian Prewett. How weak his concept of hate back then seemed to him now. How pitiful his understanding of the word back then had been compared to the burning purity of his hate for the werewolf that was now less than ten feet away.

The flaming werewolf leaped up towards him.

**"AVADA KEDAVRA."**

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***26 June 1985***

***The home of Lazarus White***

Buck found Lazarus asleep on the couch in his living room. The door to the house was still off its hinges, the window behind the couch still shattered. A half-dozen liquor bottles were on the floor. Buck summoned a waste basket from across the room and then levitated the bottles into it. The loud crash of the bottles dropped into the metal can startled Lazarus awake.

"Get up, son," Buck said. "We need to talk."

"About what," he replied while staring off into the distance with reddened eyes.

"They finally found the Tully gang, Rusty. What's left of them, anyway. Fiendfyre burned everything a quarter mile in every direction from their hideout. The whole pack's dead, including Tully. *However*, there was just enough of Eustace Tully left to determine that he died of the Killing Curse."

"He was a killer and a werewolf. We don't do personality death for animals like that."

"We don't use the *Killing Curse* either, Rusty! It's still an Unforgivable, even on a werewolf!"

"You here to arrest me, Buck." The other man looked deeply offended.

"NO! Damn you, *NO!*" he yelled, causing Rusty to wince from his hangover. Then, Buck looked away for a second to get hold of himself. "But somebody will. Nguyen is slow-walking the investigation, but you'll have a day at most before they come to take you in for questioning."

Rusty said nothing.

"Dammit, boy! Do you not care that they will *erase* you for using that curse! No matter what your provocation!"

"Good," he said. "I don't want to be me anymore. Maybe forgetting everything is for the best."

Buck glared at his son-in-law in mounting fury.

"You *bastard!* Do you hate me that much?!" Rusty lifted his head to look at Buck in shock. The older man continued.

"For ten years since my Nora died, I've lived for Matilda and nothing else. And in one night, I lost my daughter and my grandson! Hell, in this past year, I even lost *Daisy*! And now, you expect me to just lose you as well, Rusty! Because that's what will happen if they erase everything that makes you *you*. I ... I can't lose ... *everything*!"

Rusty sat up, surprised at the man's attitude. "You'd lose me anyway, Buck. I have no defense. It's personality death or just ... run away."

"But if you ran, I'd have *hope*, Rusty! Hope that you were still out there alive for Matty's sake." Buck's voice broke and he struggled to keep his composure. "You're not just my son-in-law, Rusty. You're my *son*. You're the boy I watched grow into a man just to become good enough for my Matilda, and I love you for it!" The man began to weep openly now. "I would rather you be Rusty White on the run for the rest of your life than for them to erase you and turn you into some fucking green grocer or pig farmer on the far side of the continent who would live and die without ever remembering Matilda and Leo's *names*. Please, lad! Don't ... don't leave me with ... with *nothing*!"

At that, the powerful man finally broke down into heaving sobs, and after a few seconds, Rusty began to cry as well. The two men - now father and son - held each other as they wept over what they had lost. Once they had recovered a bit, the two talked and made plans. Buck would delay the investigation into whether Rusty was the one who used the Killing Curse against Tully, while Rusty packed up everything he cared to take with him (which wasn't much) before vanishing into the night with a new face. When he was settled, he would send word to Buck that he was safe. And then, he would live his life.

For Matilda and for Leo.

After an hour had passed, Buck departed, and Rusty started cleaning up to see what was salvageable and what would be left behind. There wasn't much. He would be starting over ... *again*. It wasn't as though a brand new life would fall into his lap or anything. Then, later that afternoon, there was a knock at the door Rusty had only just repaired. He opened it carefully, half expecting it to be an auror squad with a warrant for him. Instead, to his surprise, it was a man who looked even more out of place in Wagga Wagga than Lazarus White had when he first walked into the Waltzing Matilda five years earlier in all his Pureblood finery.

"Good day, sir!" said the fop who was sporting lavender robes with a gold satin vest underneath. "By any chance, would you be Lazarus White?"

"Who wants to know?" Rusty said cautiously.

"*ha-Ha!* A perspicacious question, my good man. I'm an author and an expert on the Dark Arts and how to fight them, and I wish to interview you for my upcoming treatise on werewolves. Lockhart's the name. *Gilderoy Lockhart*, at your service."

Bemused, Rusty opened the door and let the ridiculous popinjay into the wreckage of his house and his life. The next day, when the aurors came for Lazarus White, he was already gone.

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**25 December 1985**

**The Lonely Home of Buck MacMillan**

Buck MacMillan awoke early on Christmas morning to the sound of a soft yapping from downstairs in his home. He

crept downstairs and, to his vast surprise, found a small Tasmanian wolf pup with a red bow around his neck sitting under the small Christmas tree. The tree itself was also a surprise, as Buck had not felt inclined to put one up this year. He went over to examine the pup and saw a small wrapped package next to it with his name on it. Inside was a book: ***Wanderings with Werewolves*** by Gilderoy Lockhart. Just a few pages inside was a card which simply said:

*The pup's name is Regulus, but you can probably just call  
him Reggie.  
Happy Christmas.*

The card was located next to the dedication page, and he gasped at what was written there as well.

*To Matty, Leo and Daisy, who all live on in my heart.*

Buck smiled and wiped a tear from his cheek. It was a Happy Christmas after all.

# Three Princes

## CHAPTER 80 - Three Princes

**9 May 1993**

### ***The Prince's Lair***

*"But enough about ancient history," said Lucius. "Regulus Black, I should like to know very much where you have been these last thirteen years."*

*"Well, Lucius, it's a long story. One that starts with a cave in Dorset. No, that's not right. It really begins ... with a house elf."*

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"In 1979," Regulus began, "the Dark Lord demanded the use of a house elf, so I sent my family's servant Kreacher to do his bidding and then return to me when he was finished. The poor thing showed back up around midnight nearly dead. You see, Voldemort needed the elf to test the magical defenses of a treasure he wanted protected, and apparently, in his arrogance, Voldemort failed to realize that house elves could easily bypass any and all wards if ordered to do so by their masters. I had ordered Kreacher to return, and the fact that he was poisoned almost to death was not enough to keep him from fulfilling his duties. By that point, I was already ... ambivalent about continuing my association with the Death Eaters, and I was incensed at what had happened to Kreacher, so I decided to follow his footsteps and find out exactly what Voldemort considered so important as to hide under such extreme security."

Regulus paused as if collecting himself. "It turned out to be a golden locket bearing the crest of Salazar Slytherin ... and



containing a fragment of the Dark Lord's soul."

Lucius's eyes flashed in a fury. "You mean...?" he hissed.

Regulus nodded.

"It was a horcrux?" Harry asked in clarification. Both men turned to look at him as if he'd just sprouted horns.

"As I believe I mentioned, Harry Potter," Regulus said after a long pause, "you are *dangerously well-informed*. How in the name of Morgana's lacy underthings did you ever learn that word?!"

Harry shrugged. "Actually, I picked it up less than an hour ago from Rufus Scrimgeour. It was the word he used to give a name to an object Headmaster Dumbledore described to me." He paused and turned to Malfoy. "The diary was a horcrux as well."

Lucius closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

"I take it you didn't know, Mr. Malfoy?" Harry inquired.

"*Of course not!*" Malfoy snapped. "I knew it was a dark object which the Dark Lord had ordered my father to conceal and, as he put it, to treasure more than the lives of all his family members combined, a fact that Father was only too happy to share with me. When the aurors began raiding Pureblood homes in the aftermath of that debacle at your birthday party last summer, I elected to rid the house of everything that I thought might lead to censure or worse. Narcissa doesn't know I removed it or that I ever even had it. Most of the items I stored in the secret vaults beneath Borgin and Burkes, but they flatly refused to keep the diary on the premises. I later learned that it was because Tom

Riddle had once been an employee of theirs, and they feared keeping the diary onsite might implicate them in his disappearance."

"Woah, woah, woah," said Regulus angrily. "I've been on the run from the aurors for two days and am obviously a bit behind. What's all this about a diary that's also a horcrux?"

Harry briefly filled him in on what they'd learned about the diary, its effects on Ron Weasley, and how it had made its way into his possession. Regulus turned towards Lucius. "You gave *a horcrux* to an eleven-year-old girl?!"

Lucius looked at him with a sour expression. "Keep a civil tongue, Regulus. At the time, I had no reason to think it was a horcrux. My father, in a depressingly typical failure of his paternal obligations, never taught me the identification spells. I knew only that it was a dark object I no longer wished to keep under my roof. Unfortunately, I subsequently had that ill-timed encounter with Arthur Weasley in front of Flourish & Blotts. Between my desire to be rid of dangerous contraband and the force of the Oath of Emnity I was under, passing the diary off to one of his children suddenly seemed an entirely reasonable course of action. My assumption was that the diary would be discovered when the girl tried to carry it through the school's wards. I thought that it would be personally and professionally embarrassing to Weasley and might well derail his Muggle Protection Act. But I never dreamed anyone would actually be able to penetrate the school with an object so obviously cursed. As governor, I am well-aware of how sensitive Hogwarts' wards are to dark objects."

"Not anymore they're not," Harry said. "Apparently, the Headmaster deactivated those wards last year in order to

bring in a dark artifact that he wanted to use to capture You-Know-Who's soul."

The two Princes stared at him practically bug-eyed.

"Long story," he said.

Lucius shook his head. "I swear, that man will be the death of us all! Never mind. Let us return to the diary later. What happened after you learned of the Dark Lord's locket-horcrux, Regulus?"

"I stole the thing, left a copy behind, and charged Kreacher with destroying it. Then, having no further desire to associate with the Death Eaters, I faked my own death and left for Australia, where I forged a new identity under the name of Lazarus White, eventually becoming an auror. That lasted until my run-in with the Wagga Wagga werewolves, which drew the attention of Gilderoy Lockhart who came to interview me about what had happened. He was a wanker of gargantuan proportions and a thoroughly awful person, so I stole his identity, wandered the world as an author-adventurer-dilettante and eventually came here. That's pretty much all of the important bits."

Harry studied the man carefully. He knew there was *much* more to the story, since James Potter had said that Lazarus White's family had been "*massacred*" by those same Wagga Wagga werewolves, but Regulus clearly had no desire to discuss that and Harry wouldn't be the one to push that part of it.

"What happened when you met Lockhart?" he asked.

"Like I said, he was an unbelievable prat and, worse, a sociopathic loon. Except for the bits pertaining to Hogwarts, all the things that I had Lockhart confess to at

the Daily Prophet were things he'd actually done and had confessed to me under Veritaserum. He really did, as your father suspected, make it a habit of tracking down heroes and learning all their secrets about how they'd destroyed monsters or what have you, before Obliviating them so that he could take credit for their accomplishments. Plus, there were other ... even less savory Obliviation crimes I won't go into now on account of your youth. He tried to do the same to me, but I managed to get the best of him. An hour and three drops of Veritaserum later, I knew his whole sordid story. A few more days in a secluded spot and quite a few more vials of Veritaserum, I knew enough to pose as him for the next seven years. Frankly, knowing full well what a fraud he was, I rather enjoyed roaming the world fighting the forces of darkness under his name and actually being the dashing hero he only pretended to be. Plus, I also got to try my hand at creative writing. Turns out I'm quite good at it judging by how much Lockhart's sales improved after I took over things."

"But where was the real Lockhart during all this?" Harry asked.

"Hidden away in a private Muggle hospital in Zurich and pumped full of Draught of Living Death," he replied with a smug expression. "The doctors believed him to be in a '*persistent vegetative state*.' I retrieved him yesterday, gave him the antidote, and used the Imperius Curse to make him confess to his misdeeds – plus a few other things that I needed a patsy for – and then inflict personality death on himself with the Tabula Rasa Curse. Since that's the penalty that would have been imposed on him had he been arrested in Australia, and also a damned sight better than the room in Azkaban that would have awaited him if he'd gotten caught here in Britain, I can't bring myself to feel too badly about it."

"Not even about your admitted use of the Imperius?" Lucius said mildly.

"Yes, yes," Regulus said, waving his hand airily. "I used an Unforgivable Curse which is a one-way ticket to Azkaban, and I'd feel quite worried about my future if I thought there was the slightest chance of me getting caught. Or do either of you have plans to tattle on me?"

Lucius snorted contemptuously at that. "Ethical objections aside, perhaps it would be best if we return to the more pressing issue of the Dark Lord's ... horcruxes? Horcroi? I must confess that I do not know the plural form of horcrux. I hadn't thought it possible to create more than one."

"Neither had I," said Regulus. "It's a Medieval French translation of a forgotten Greek word, so I assume horcruxes is correct. So now that we've gotten the *proper grammar* out of the way, would you mind telling us, Harry, what exactly Dumbledore and Scrimgeour had to say about the topic?"

Harry shrugged. "Not that much, to be honest." He closed his eyes and mentally summoned up the memory.

"Dumbledore's exact words were '*Voldemort did place a fragment of his soul inside this book, using the most foul and despicable of arts and a spell whose name I will not repeat.*' And then, a bit later, Scrimgeour mentioned that the ritual Voldemort used was called the Horcrux Ritual. I think he was just trying to tweak Dumbledore for some reason. Dumbledore got mad at him and mentioned that the spell was from the Anathema Codex and that he shouldn't be talking about it in front of students."

Malfoy shook his head. "No. Scrimgeour was testing you to see if you showed any signs of recognizing the

word *horcrux*. He wanted to know if you'd had access to the Codex." Regulus nodded in agreement. Harry opened his mouth and then closed it again. Now that he thought about it, that *did* make more sense than someone as canny as Scrimgeour accidentally blurting out in front of a twelve-year-old boy something that, based on Dumbledore's reaction, seemed very much like a state secret.

*"Regulus was right when he lectured me as Lockhart in his office yesterday,"* the boy thought. *"I really do need to up my game and start paying closer attention. Wheels within wheels and all that."* He shook off that thought and returned to the matter at hand.

"But why would he even think that I might know anything about horcruxes? I'd never even heard about the Anathema Codex before you talked about it this year in DADA."

"You are the Heir Presumptive to the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, Harry," said Regulus. "The Ancient and Noble Houses *created* the Wizengamot in large part to fashion a state-run mechanism to control and suppress knowledge of the Anathema Codex and the information within it. Other nations have similar bodies, but Britain is the only one where it evolved into the hereditary aristocracy that runs the country. It was plausible to think that your father might have briefed you on the topic."

Lucius snorted. "Assuming the man himself knows anything about it. Setting aside your notorious estrangement from James Potter, I seem to recall that Charlus Potter died before James reached the age of twenty, and the younger Potter was still known for his rashness and immaturity even then. It is possible that Charlus did not entrust him with any knowledge of the Codex prior to his death and that James

Potter has failed to locate the Codex in his family vault or to understand its significance if he has seen it."

"Okay," said Harry somewhat testily. "We'll just add that to the list of ways my father has failed in his duties as Lord of the House and move on. Now what *can* you tell me about the Horcrux Ritual that Dumbledore describes as the most foul and despicable of arts? Or do you *also* think it's something no innocent twelve-year-old waif should know about?"

"Don't get peevish, Harry," said Regulus. "We'll tell you what we think you should know which will be more than what 99% of the wizards in Britain will ever hear. You're scion of an Ancient and Noble House and also a promising candidate for Prince of Slytherin, so I think you're entitled." He looked over at Lucius, who nodded his assent. "A horcrux is a soul anchor. If you've created one and later get killed, it will prevent your soul from moving on from the material plane. You're not a ghost exactly. You're much more, well, *active* than that, able to move about freely and to possess animals and weak-willed people. The centuries-old friendly and genial Hogwarts ghosts – Bloody Baron aside – are atypical, the result of the castle's magic. Most ghosts either dissipate harmlessly after a few years or go insane and maintain themselves on the fear they produce by haunting people. A horcrux-bound soul doesn't have to worry about that. And unlike a ghost, you *can* be restored to life if a suitable new body is fashioned for you. The main requirement for making a horcrux is that you kill someone who did nothing to wrong you and you show no regret for having done so. That destabilizes your soul in such a way that it allows you to shear off a portion of it and store it inside a prepared magical object."

"It has to be magical? Voldemort couldn't make a horcrux out of any random pebble or something?"

"No, the Codex says it has to be a magical item. In fact, it would be wasteful if he *didn't* use a magical object. Aside from the benefits of having a soul anchor, you can access whatever magical properties the object originally had even if the object isn't in your possession, and if the horcrux gets destroyed, it's possible that you will *permanently* gain whatever those powers are. The locket, for example, improved the wearer's facility with Legilimency, and the Dark Lord's skill at that is legendary." Regulus paused. "Which begs the question of what Tom Riddle's old diary could do that made it an attractive choice for a horcrux?"

Harry hesitated and then spoke cautiously, watching the other two men for their reactions. "In the Chamber, Voldemort said that Tom Riddle originally enchanted the diary to record his notes and thoughts in order to help with his homework and essays."

Regulus frowned. "Hmm, still pretty weak magic for a horcrux. You can use things you enchant *yourself* if they're important enough to you, but I don't see how a random student's study aid would be powerful enough." Lucius said nothing but looked thoughtful.

"Lord Malfoy," said Harry carefully. "What do you know about Tom Riddle? When we talked after Draco's petrification, I was pretty sure you knew the name then. Obviously, you recognize it from the diary, but was there anything else?"

"Very little. I, of course, knew that Tom Riddle was my predecessor as Prince, though the Hydra was oddly reluctant to speak of him. When the Dark Lord presented



the diary to my father, I inquired about the name. In retrospect, it was terribly foolish of me, and I'm surprised that neither of them placed me under the Cruciatus for my impertinence. Instead, the Dark Lord laughed and told me that Riddle was a Mudblood and a blood traitor who had somehow found his way into Slytherin, and that he had murdered Riddle years earlier for disgracing our House and fashioned the man's diary into a magical artifact of great power. That was all he had to say, and I chose not to inquire further at that time."

Harry stared at Malfoy, as if trying to confirm that he was being truthful. When he was satisfied that the man was, Harry pulled his wand, cast the Pyrologos spell, and wrote the words *Tom Marvolo Riddle* in the air in flaming letters.

"You, um, might want to brace yourselves," he said as he slashed his wand through the air. The letters moved around to spell out "*I AM LORD VOLDEMORT*." Upon reading the words, Lucius appeared thunderstruck, while Regulus immediately became excited.

"OF COURSE!" he exclaimed before jumping out of his chair to examine the list of former Princes. "Tom Riddle was Prince from 1943 to 1945. Then, he just disappeared. And *then*, years later, the Dark Lord showed up out of nowhere with no apparent history and claiming to have killed Riddle. And no one made the connection, even though they're both British Parselmouths and incredibly powerful wizards!" He whirled back around to face Harry as if suddenly frustrated and annoyed.

"So *WHY* did no one make that obvious connection?!" he asked as if suddenly realizing how his deductions didn't add up. Harry had the answer.

"The Headmaster's theory is that Voldemort first put his soul fragment inside the diary and then used it to give the diary self-awareness and a personality just different enough from his own that it could serve as Secret Keeper for a Fidelius, one that concealed the connection between Riddle and Voldemort."

"A Fidelius," said Regulus in wonderment. "Would a Fidelius even work that way?"

Lucius looked thoughtful. "Quite possibly, I would think. The horcrux, after all, invokes principles of Wild Magic. I should think it could easily be used to bypass the normal restrictions on any conventional spells cast upon it, especially one as free form as the Fidelius."

"Okay," interrupted Harry. "Wild Magic. Is that from the Anathema Codex or what?"

Malfoy looked to Regulus, who shrugged. "He's a good Third Level Occlumens, and since you're on the Throne, he'll be protected by the Lair's defenses. I say tell him what he wants to know. We'll need someone we can trust on the inside of Hogwarts, I suspect."

Malfoy considered that and turned back to Harry. "I presume, Potter, that you experienced accidental magic as a child, as most of us did." The boy nodded. "*That* is Wild Magic in its most simplistic form. You cast no spell. You held no wand. And yet, you wished for something and it came to pass, quite likely in a seemingly impossible manner. Magic in its *raw* form, freed of the restrictions placed upon it by the techniques taught here at Hogwarts and at other magical schools, can be summed up in eight simple words: '*As I will it, so mote it be.*' Our kind have spent millennia striving to limit magic's potential, to ensure that magic is

irrevocably linked to wands and incantations, defined as charms and transfigurations and potions, and restrained by the principles of arithmancy and runic matrices. The minute you picked up a compatible wand at Olivander's, those sparks that shot out represented your promise as a wizard that you would work magic according to the principles taught you here at Hogwarts. After that, I dare say you never experienced accidental magic again except perhaps under the most extreme provocations. Even if you should one day master wandless magic in some form, it will *still* be based on your sense memory of casting the same spells with a wand in your hand."

"But ... why?" Harry asked in confusion. "Why go to all that trouble to ... *bind* Magic?"

"It's like you said after we saw the *Imago Dei*, Harry. If every wizard or witch could work magic just by wishing really hard, it would tear the world apart."

"Imago ... Dei?" Lucius said weakly. "You have encountered by a horcrux *and* the Imago Dei this year?!"

"Like Harry said, long story," Regulus said with a grim expression. "And one I can't say much about due to an oath, but yes, we have both witnessed the memory of the Imago Dei being cast. It was every bit as terrifying as you might expect."

Lucius shook his head. "You realize, of course, that it is *significant* that you and Potter have both encountered Codex spells within such a short span of time. There are no coincidences where Wild Magic is concerned. Fate is but an instrument of the Wild."

"I know," Regulus said solemnly. "And can I assume from your reaction to all this that you now agree that the Dark

Lord must be fought, whatever our prior allegiances?"

Lucius sighed heavily. "My prior support for the Dark Lord was *never* the result of ... allegiance, Black. But you are right. Voldemort's creation of multiple horcruxes marks him as the foe of all wizarding kind. Indeed, perhaps an enemy of the entire human race. We must proceed cautiously against him, at least until the horcrux situation is fully examined and resolved. And it goes without saying that this is a matter for Slytherins with no room for Gryffindor foolishness or heroics. But yes, I am in agreement with you."

Harry raised his hand as if inquiring of a professor. "Um, question: Can you expand on that whole '*enemy of the human race*' business?"

"Given your experiences with the Dark Lord, Harry, surely you agree that he is a monster who must be fought and defeated," said Regulus. "Especially now that you know of his horcruxes."

"Well that's just it. I *don't* know much of anything about horcruxes except what you just told me. I know you kill someone, and that lets you put part of your soul inside a magical object that anchors you against dying. But you two and Dumbledore talk about horcruxes like they're the most evil things ever devised."

"Have you encountered something worse, Harry?" Regulus said with some surprise.

Harry shook his head as he struggled to express himself. "Look, I understand that the horcrux basically calls for a human sacrifice, and that is undeniably horrible and evil. But Voldemort personally killed *hundreds*, and the movement he led killed *thousands*. I guess I'm having

trouble seeing why the fact that he used some of those murders to extend his own life is so much worse than the mere fact that he committed all those murders in the first place."

Regulus opened his mouth to respond, but Malfoy interrupted. "He raises a valid point, Regulus. It occurs to me that we have danced around the most salient point of the Horcrux Ritual, which is also the reason for our revulsion at our former master."

Black thought about that and nodded. "Alright then. The truth, Harry, is that we don't really know much about what we call the Horcrux *Ritual*. Part of why I came to Hogwarts disguised as Lockhart was to gain access to the Restricted Section of the Library, but there wasn't much useful information there. Even ***Magick Moste Evil*** didn't have much to say and I had to handle that book with gloves just to touch it safely. The Anathema Codex says the horcrux is created through Wild Magic, so there's probably not much of a ritual to it at all. In fact, it's possible that all you physically need to do is kill someone and then concentrate hard on sending a part of your soul into a suitable vessel. There wouldn't be anything that we could consider spellwork as part of the process. But what we *do* know is that creating a horcrux is esoteric magic. Like the Patronus Charm, it requires a certain mindset to properly cast. More than that, to *keep* a horcrux, you have to maintain this mindset constantly for the rest of your life and even *after your death*."

"What mindset?" Harry asked cautiously. He suspected he wouldn't like the answer.

"An absolute certainty that out of the entire human race, your life is the only one with any value," said Lucius bluntly.

Harry's eyes widened in surprise as the implications of such a mindset became clearer.

"Or to put that another way," Regulus said, "if there is a single man, woman, or child in the entire world who you might refrain from brutally murdering in order to make a horcrux, then you would never be able to create a horcrux at all. Moreover, if something ever happened to cause you to feel that degree of empathy for anyone else, any of your existing horcruxes would lose their soul-anchoring properties."

"Got it," said Harry in a shaky voice. "A technique for achieving immortality that can only be used by murdering psychopaths. I can see what people wanted that spell suppressed."

Lucius nodded. "In fact, it is a rare psychopath indeed who can possess such a level of absolute detachment from even the most basic forms of empathy. In retrospect, it seems astonishing that Tom Riddle could have risen as far as he did as a student without his true nature being discovered."

"I don't think he was a psychopath at all in the beginning." Quickly, Harry told the other two Slytherins what he'd learned about the circumstances surrounding Moaning Myrtle's death. "Riddle was a natural but self-taught Occlumens. Completely by accident, he killed someone who was at the very least a friend, and from the way Myrtle talked, possibly more than a friend. And rather than deal with the trauma, he inverted his Occlumency and used it to permanently burn out his ability to feel empathy or affection in any form. Would *that* have allowed him to maintain the horcrux mindset?"

The two men looked at one another. "Easily," Regulus said with a frown. "And once he did so, his newfound lack of regret over killing the girl would have allowed him to perform the soul-manipulation later even if he didn't actually kill the girl for the purposes of making a horcrux." He looked back and forth between his two peers. "So what do we with the knowledge that Voldemort made at least two horcruxes?"

"Three," Harry interrupted, causing the two men to turn to him once more in shock. Regulus spat out an expletive while Harry continued.

"In the Chamber, Riddle *also* said that he had the Ravenclaw Diadem but that it was hidden far away and he could still access its powers. That sounds like he made it a horcrux too, right?"

"Lucius," Regulus said, while massaging his temples, "how many horcruxes is it possible to make?"

"I haven't a clue. We'd have to consult an Arithmancer to determine what number might be the most magically stable, assuming that in his hubris, the Dark Lord even concerned himself with matters of stability. Any more than one is a sign of suicidal madness, since each additional horcrux further damages the integrity of the soul and increases the likelihood that it would degenerate or even fall apart."

Suddenly, he assumed a thoughtful expression.

"You know," he said to Harry, "it's possible that your brother might have had *nothing at all* to do with the Dark Lord's destruction. I suspect he planned to use the Killing Curse on Jim Potter as a prelude to creating another horcrux. Killing the so-called Child of Prophecy and using his death

to further strengthen his immortality would have amused him. Only on that occasion, he rolled the dice one time too many, and his soul ruptured in a backlash of uncontrolled Wild Magic."

Harry shook his head. "There might be something to that, but Jim definitely has some sort of '*Voldemott-killing*' power. There was an incident last year involving Voldemort possessing a teacher who got incinerated when he tried to kill Jim and me. And there's also ... another fact I'm not at liberty to discuss."

"An oath?" asked Regulus.

"I ... really couldn't say."

"Noted."

"Let us move on to the next matter for concern: How did the Dark Lord even acquire knowledge of the Horcrux Ritual?" Lucius asked.

"Well, the copy of him from the diary said he spent years searching the world for rare occult knowledge, but he wasn't a very reliable narrator, and it's not something the real Voldemort would have wanted shared." Harry thought for a moment. "You were talking earlier about how the Ancient and Noble Houses were the guardians of this information, right? Does each Ancient and Noble House keep a copy of the codex?"

"No," said Lucius. "Only those which date back to the founding of the Wizengamot?"

"Were the Gaunts part of the founding families?"



Lucius and Regulus looked at one another. "Yes," said Regulus. "Why?"

"Tom Riddle's mother was a squib, but his maternal grandfather was Marvolo Gaunt, the last Lord Gaunt. And Dumbledore said that when Riddle returned to Hogwarts as a rising Sixth Year, he was already wearing the Gaunt family ring. Could he have gotten a copy of the Codex that way?"

"Yes," said Lucius eagerly. "Almost certainly so if he obtained his family ring." Then, Lucius barked out a laugh. "Everyone was so awestruck by the Dark Lord's grasp of obscure magic ... and it turns out he simply read it all out of a book, a copy of which many of us kept locked away in our vaults because we were afraid to touch it."

Lucius shook his head and turned back to Regulus. "What became of the locket?"

"As far as I know, either Kreacher found a way to destroy it or else it's hidden at 12 Grimmauld Place, the home I grew up in. And, unfortunately, the home I can't get into. The wards locked the place down when my mother finally passed away in 1985. Arcturus died last year, which means that Sirius is Lord Black now, despite his imprisonment, and he's the only one who can get into Grimmauld Place to retrieve it. Which brings me to my *next* question. Lucius, can you kindly explain to me how my brother Sirius came to be sentenced to Azkaban for being, and I quote, '*You-Know-Who's right hand man*'? Because unless he changed a great deal indeed in the two years after I left, I find that description highly improbable."

"Frankly, I thought it implausible myself. He was arrested based solely on the testimony James and Lilly Potter and a sworn statement from Peter Pettigrew. That was sufficient

to hold him over for a secret trial under the Death Eater laws, in the course of which he apparently confessed to many crimes, most notably the use of the Imperius against a number of Wizengamot members found to have Dark Marks, including myself. I know for a fact that at least six of us who were freed by his testimony were, in fact, Death Eaters, and most of the others who served the Dark Lord and were acquitted thanks to him were much more ... more *enthusiastic* than I." He turned to Harry.

"Tiberius Nott, the father of your young friend, Theodore Nott, was among them."

"I know. By the way, thank you for taking Theo in last summer."

"I was happy to do so and am just as happy to do so again for the foreseeable future." The corner of Lucius's mouth twitched slightly. "His mother and I ... were students together. I was saddened by her passing."

Harry nodded. "Tiberius killed her, you know."

"I'd thought as much, Potter, but it's not something I can address in the near future save by doing what I can to protect young Theodore from his father's brutality. In any case, Regulus, to answer your question, I was quite surprised to learn that Sirius Black was a Death Eater. But then, I was equally surprised to learn the same about Barty Crouch's son. It seemed obvious at the time that the Dark Lord had been more successful in recruiting outside Slytherin House than had been generally thought."

"So you can't tell me anything about Sirius's conviction," Regulus said rather testily. "Other than the fact that it saved you and a bunch of other Death Eaters from Azkaban."

"Sirius saved more than me, Regulus. He saved *Slytherin House itself*. In the last days of the war, when it seemed clear that the Dark Lord drew preferentially from the House of the Snakes, there was a move in the Wizengamot to abolish Slytherin House entirely."

"How would *that* have worked?" Harry asked in shock.

"Oh, rather easily, I think. Simply brick over the passages leading to the dungeon. Then, reassign all the remaining Slytherin students randomly to other houses and do the same to any students who were later Sorted as Slytherins by the Hat. Those should-have-been Slytherins would spend their entire school years mis-Sorted into the wrong Houses and suffer the scorn of their Housemates for their dark natures that were insinuated by the Hat's original declarations."

Lucius took a deep breath as he recalled those days.

"And *then*, a miracle took place, as one of the most prominent Gryffindors of his generation was revealed to have been the Dark Lord's lieutenant and, moreover, confessed to being the one who used the Imperius on so many '*innocent Slytherins*' thereby besmirching our House's reputation. To be honest, I'm quite grateful for Sirius's actions, even though I find it improbable that he was a Death Eater and impossible to believe that any of his confession was true."

"It wasn't," Harry said. "Last year, Voldemort acted like he'd never even heard Sirius Black's name before."

Regulus laughed in amazement. "You actually *interrogated* the Dark Lord about Sirius?!"

"More like struggled to come up with questions to stall for time before he decided to kill me. But yeah, he didn't recognize the name Sirius Black. And more importantly, he said that the Potters' Secret Keeper was someone who came to him only a week before he attacked Godric's Hollow, not someone who'd been working for him for years as Sirius's trial testimony seemed to show." He thought for a moment. "Is it possible to *fake* Veritaserum testimony?"

Regulus thought about it. "It's possible to fake your own testimony if your Occlumency is good enough. Just alter your own memories about what happened and then testify to the fake memories rather than what actually happened. But I can't imagine why Sirius would have done that to himself and altered his memories to make himself *think* he was a Death Eater when he wasn't. False Memory Charms might fool Veritaserum, but part of the trial testimony procedure is making the witness hold a Remembrall prior to testifying. Veritaserum trumps the Imperius and the Confundus, and I can't think of any other techniques that could get Sirius to confess to all those crimes that would neither have been completely obvious nor impossible to do in the amount of time available."

Then, Regulus smiled almost mischievously.

"Maybe I'll ask him about it when I see him."

Lucius looked at him severely. "Regulus? What are you scheming?" The other man didn't answer, but he did give a mean grin. Harry's eyes widened as once more connections slide into place.

"The research teams," he said in a quietly awestruck voice.

"What?" asked Lucius.

"All year long while disguised as Lockhart, Regulus has kept the top students here at the school working on various research projects. Some of them were just advanced defense techniques, but he also had people working on research into Memory Charms, the Patronus, an improved Portkey that can pass through anti-Portkey wards, even a group working on Polyjuice Potion that provided him with gallons of the stuff!" He turned to Regulus with an amazed expression.

"You plan to bust him out!" he exclaimed. "The real reason you came to Hogwarts was to gain the means *to break Sirius Black out of Azkaban!*"

Regulus laughed. "Oh Harry. You've hardly scratched the surface of my ambitions!"

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### ***Meanwhile in the Infirmary...***

Ron opened his eyes cautiously and then sat up to look around the Infirmary. George was snoring softly in the bed next to him, and Jim looked like he was asleep in the bed on the opposite side of the room. The rest of the Weasleys ... were gone.

"*Figures,*" he thought miserably. "*They must know what I've done by now. That there's not a single member of our family I haven't betrayed in some way.*" He glanced over towards Jim's bed again. "*Nor any friend.*"

Now that the power of the diary was broken, Ron found that he was starting to remember more and more. Not the inner thoughts of the dark wizard who had manipulated and enslaved him, thankfully. But he remembered everything he'd said and done while influenced by the diary, only now without the false emotions it had forced upon him.

Worse, he was starting to remember the times when Tom had been in direct control. Hazy nightmarish memories, but they were there. The memories of riding around as a helpless passenger in his own body. Of sending the basilisk to petrify classmates. Of mocking Dumbledore before striking him down. Of stealing George's explosive runes and then using them to blow up the Mandrakes ... and nearly his own brothers. Of shooting Jim in the back with a Stunner. Of sending the Basilisk after the entire faculty. Of ordering it to *kill* Jim and Harry. But as bad as Ron's shame over his actions was, and as bad as his worry was over what everyone would think of him, his dominant emotion at the moment was fear. Not for himself, but for his friends. Voldemort had turned him into a weapon against Hogwarts, and there was nothing the boy could possibly do to stop the evil wizard if he decided to do it again.

Then, Ron's breath stopped for a second. "*No*," he thought. "*There is one thing I can do. Something that's right instead of what's easy.*"

He sat up in his bed and looked around the room. The few inhabitants were either asleep or still petrified. Carefully, he slipped out of his bed. He started to reach for the wand sitting on his bedside table, but then he changed his mind and left it behind. It might get broken, and if it were intact, his parents could perhaps resell it. At least they'd have gotten something worthwhile from him. As quietly as possible, Ron crept to the door and out of the Infirmary.

Seconds later, as if alerted to some new danger, Jim awoke and looked around the room. Instantly, he saw Ron's empty bed, and his blood ran cold. "Bugger," he said under his breath.

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### ***Back in the Lair ...***

"Okay," said Harry. "It's been a very long day, and I'm kind of exhausted. Plus, I'm going to have nightmares about everything we've talked about *including* Regulus's little bombshell. But before I go to bed, there's one last thing I'd like to talk about, and ... well, it's kind of sensitive."

"Oh?" Lucius asked, intrigued.

"Yes. There's ... no delicate way to put this, Mr. Malfoy, so I'll just come right out and say it. Last summer, someone tried to kill me with a doxy swarm and then with a cursed toy train a month later, and then they tried again at the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quiddith match." He took a deep breath. "Did, ah, you have anything to do with that by any chance?"

Lucius looked surprisingly offended. "Certainly not! I am, of course, aware of those ridiculous events, but while I have committed my fair share of sins, Mr. Potter, I am no fan of Le Grand Guignol!"

Harry blinked. "I have no idea what that means."

"He's offended that you would think he'd try to kill you by such clumsy, melodramatic, and horrific schemes," Regulus said with an amused chuckle.

"Oh," Harry replied nonplussed. "Sorry?"

"Mr. Potter," Lucius said patiently but firmly. "While I have not researched your life in depth, I have naturally made a preliminary study. If I had been inclined to kill you, I would have paid a visit to your late uncle at his place of employment, placed him under the Imperius Curse, and then instructed you to murder you in your sleep along with

his own wife and son before setting fire to the house and killing himself in a way that would make the whole thing look accidental."

Harry adjusted his collar with one finger. He wasn't sure if the wards Dumbledore had put on the house would have prevented that fairly straightforward murder plot, but it certainly *sounded* like it would work.

"Now," Lucius continued, "what leads you to suspect that I might wish to kill you? And under such ludicrous circumstances?"

Harry hesitated. "If I tell you, will you ... I dunno, promise not to seek a terrible revenge against anyone?"

"No," Lucius said flatly. "But I will promise that any actions I take will be proportionate."

Harry figured that was the best deal he would get. "Your house elf Dobby came to me and warned me about the doxy swarm. And later, he put up a barrier at King's Cross Station in a failed effort to stop me from coming the Hogwarts. And I think he was involved in the rogue bludger incident somehow. Not the spiky one but the other one that seemed like it was trying to defend me at times before it finally knocked me out cold."

Lucius nodded and then turned to look at the center of the table. "Dobby!" With a crack, the strange little house elf appeared. It noticed both Lucius and Harry and immediately looked terrified.

"Dobby," Lucius said again, firmly but not unkindly. "I am not angry with you, but I do have questions that you will answer. Be advised that I am officially exercising Clause 19 of my marriage contract with your Mistress Narcissa. If you



believe yourself forbidden to answer any question pursuant to the terms of the marriage contract, you will say '*Dobby is barred from answering.*' If you find yourself unable to answer for any other reason, you will say '*Dobby cannot say.*' Do you understand?" The elf nodded.

"Now, did my wife play any roll in the attacks on Harry Potter?"

"Dobby is barred from answering."

"Did she use Mogli to attack Mr. Potter?"

"Dobby is barred from answering."

"Did you attempt to protect Harry Potter even without being ordered to do so?"

"Yes, Master."

"Because you learned that he was in danger?"

"Yes, Master."

"And you learned this while at Malfoy Manor?"

"Yes, Master."

"Why did you feel compelled to protect Mr. Potter?"

"Dobby cannot say."

Lucius was silent for a moment before his next question.

"Does your desire to protect Harry Potter outweigh your desire to be a good and loyal house elf in the service of House Malfoy."

Dobby didn't answer aloud, but after a brief hesitation, he shook his head yes.

Lucius sighed. "Mogli!" he called out. There was no response. He called again twice more before calling out "Lemmy!" Instantly, there was another house elf standing next to Dobby, one Harry didn't recognize. It was a female elf who looked somewhat distraught.

"Lemmy," Lucius said, "where is Mogli? Why does he not respond to my call?"

"Begging your pardon, Master Lucius, sir. But Mogli now answers only to the Mistress. She has exercised her rights under Clause 19 and is leaving Malfoy Manor as we speak. Oh, Master Lucius! What's to become of us?" The female elf seemed on the verge of tears.

Lucius grinned almost wolfishly. "We shall persevere, Lemmy. We shall rebuild. And one day, we shall take our revenge. Return to the Manor. Prepare a meal consisting of all my favorite foods. And dry your tears! For tonight we celebrate!" Lemmy nodded and then popped away.

"What the hell was all *that* about?" Regulus asked in confusion. "Why are you so chipper all of the sudden?"

"Because as of ten seconds ago, I am divorced. And I have also just lost approximately seventy-five percent of the gold in my Gringotts Vault."

"That's awful!" said Harry in a horrified voice.

"Yes, well, it certainly *would* be if that were still where I kept the bulk of my liquid assets," the man said with a somewhat vicious smile. He studied Dobby who swallowed nervously, before turning back to Harry.

"Now then," he said. "I have a quandary. I cannot tolerate a disloyal house elf in my service, but neither can I allow my wife to continue her efforts to kill you, Mr. Potter. If nothing else, it might reflect badly on me if she succeeded. The solution to both these problems is simple. How would you like to purchase a house elf?"

Dobby looked at Lucius in confusion. Then, a light seemed to go off as he understood what the man was saying, and he turned to Harry with a hopeful expression.

"Um," Harry said uncertainly. "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Well, the alternative is for me to simply kill Dobby. Is that preferable?"

"Eek!" squeaked the now terrified Dobby who looked like he was about to start wailing. Harry scowled.

"That's manipulative and underhanded, Mr. Malfoy."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. Your compliment is appreciated."

Harry sighed. "So how much do house elves go for?"

"Generally between five and ten thousand galleons depending on the elf's age and general competency, but I'm feeling magnanimous so ... one sickle?"

Harry felt for his money pouch and then remembered it was in his trunk. He looked up at Regulus sheepishly. "By any chance, do you have a sickle I could borrow?"

Regulus laughed and reached into his pocket.

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### ***Meanwhile atop the Astronomy Tower ...***

It was cold up on top of the tower, despite the warm May night. Ron stared out into the distance to take in the view. The moon was bright, and even at night he was struck by the beauty of the Scottish countryside and the lights of Hogsmeade in the distance. Then, he looked down out of the window towards the grounds far below and shuddered. It was a long way down, and he wondered how much it would hurt to hit the bottom. He wished he'd had the time to write a goodbye note, but he was afraid of being discovered and interrupted. And anyway, in light of what he'd done, Ron assumed that the reaction of most people to his death would be relief that the Heir of Slytherin would trouble them no more. An actual suicide note might perversely cause people to miss him and feel guilty about his death, and he didn't want that. With luck, his family would assume that some residual mind control of the diary made him do it and that it wasn't anything that could have been prevented. He hoped that no one would think him a coward, but they probably would anyway. Which was ironic in a way, since Ron felt that this might be the bravest thing he'd ever done - killing himself to ensure that Voldemort could never use him again.

Slowly and carefully, he climbed up onto the parapet, almost laughing at his own caution. It was as though he was afraid of falling accidentally before he had a chance to jump of his own free will. He looked down again and felt just a touch of vertigo, but he closed his eyes to shut it out. He took a deep breath ...

... and jumped.

**"ACCIO RON WEASLEY!"**

For a second, Ron felt weightless before the spell caught him and yanked him back onto the tower. He landed near the doorway and looked up into the face of a furious Jim Potter.

"YOU *IDIOT!*" the other boy bellowed in a rage. "Do you *know* what I went through to *save your life!* I took a *BLOODY BASILISK FANG* for you! I was willing to *DIE* to save you! And now you want to *THROW IT ALL AWAY!*"

Ron closed his eyes and laid back on the cold stone floor of the Astronomy Tower. "You wouldn't have *had* to face the Basilisk if you'd just killed me to start with. Harry had the right idea."

"What?"

"It means, while you were fighting the Basilisk, Harry was keeping Tom occupied. I don't remember what they talked about, but I remember Tom feeling afraid of Harry. Because Harry knew I was Tom's real weapon, not the snake. And if he'd killed me, I'd have deserved it."

"The hell you would have!" Jim snapped. Then, he paused and tried to rein in his anger. "Ron, what happened to you *wasn't your fault*. People a lot older and more experienced and stronger than you have been taken in by Voldemort. Experience adult wizards and witches who he put under the Imperius and made do all kinds of horrible things. No one is going to hold any of this year against you!"

Ron barked out a broken laugh. "Yeah, Jim. Pull the other one. I know *exactly* how people are going to treat me after this year because I know first hand how every treated *you!* I know because *I got them to do it!* And I know first hand how everyone in this school will absolutely *hate* someone

who they think is a future dark wizard and a servant of You-Know-Who."

Jim sat down on the floor next to Ron. "Ron? Would you have done *any* of that if you hadn't been under Voldemort's control?"

The boy shook his head.

"Look, Ron. Do you remember leaving the diary in my room this morning?" Ron nodded again. As he thought about it, it seemed incredible that it had just been this morning. It seemed like a lifetime away. "Well, I used the diary myself, and Tom pulled me into one of his memories and tried to keep me trapped there."

Ron's eyes went wide. "Oh Merlin, Jim! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean ...!"

"Shut up! That's not what I wanted to talk about. I wanted you to know that Tom talked about how he was able to control you by reshaping your emotions. But he said that the one thing he couldn't make you do, at least not at first, was to turn against *me*. He was only ever able to do so because of the shock you felt when I got outed as a Parselmouth. And that was *my own damned fault!* If I'd been honest with you about it – if I hadn't been so ashamed of my Parseltongue that I couldn't even tell my best friend – you might have resisted for longer and we might have figured things out even before the petrifications started."

"You're just blaming your self to cheer me up, Jim, but you don't know ..." Ron broke down at that point, his tears flowing freely. "You were in the diary, I know, but you were fighting back. And ... and so he came for me. He ... came and wanted to take me over. Needed my body to stun you –

sniff- And I tried to fight him. But he... but he..." By this point, the boy was sobbing and barely able to talk.

"He put spiders *inside me*! They -sniff- would crawl *up my throat and fill my mouth*! And ... and... I couldn't breathe and there were so many of them and all those hairy little legs!" Jim darted forward and pulled the other boy into a hug before he could go into a full blown panic attack. "And I said *yes*! I couldn't stand it and I said yes if only he'd stop even though I knew he was evil and was going to hurt people and hurt *you*! Oh God, Jim! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Jim didn't speak. He just held Ron in a tight hug and said "*Shhh*" over and over until the boy began to calm.

"It's okay, Ron. I forgive you. I *promise* I forgive you for anything you think you need to be forgiven for. He *tortured* you and you fought him better than most people could have. You may not believe it, but I'm *proud* of you. I'm proud and ... like I said on your birthday, I want my friend back!"

Ron pulled back. "You can't. You need a better friend than me, Jim. How could you *ever* trust me again? *I had V-Voldemort inside my head*!"

"You're the best friend I've ever had or ever will, Ron Weasley. And I do trust you. Voldemort's gone. You don't have any part of him inside you anymore."

Ron put his head down into his hands for several seconds as he thought about Jim's words. Finally, he looked back up into Jim's eyes. His own were red-rimmed and wet with tears, and there was something in them that looked so full of despair that it nearly broke Jim's heart.

"*Are you sssso ssssure of that, Jim Potter?*" Ron hissed.

Jim stared hard into the shattered, tear-stained face of Ron Weasley, Hogwarts' newest Parselmouth.

"Huh," he finally said in a remarkable feat of understatement.



# **The Power of Friendship**

## **CHAPTER 46: The Power of Friendship**

***10 May 1993***

***JIM POTTER SAVES THE DAY! SLAYS BEAST OF  
SLYTHERIN!  
RETRIEVES ANCIENT RELIC THAT REVIVES  
PETRIFICATION VICTIMS***

**By Rita Skeeter, reporting for the *Daily Prophet***

Faithful readers have no doubt been following the nightmarish events that have taken place over the past few days at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. The recent petrifications of several students and a cat, followed by that of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore himself. The astonishing revelation that famed adventurer and author Gilderoy Lockhart was the architect of the petrifications followed by his shocking self-Obliviation here in the very offices of the Daily Prophet. And worst of all, the horrifying development that Lockhart's foul machinations survived even after his fall, as nearly the entire Hogwarts staff was petrified leaving the students defenseless.

Luckily, once again our hero and national treasure, Jim Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, was on the case. Taking the initiative when it was revealed that Aurors were unable to penetrate Hogwarts security, Jim bravely fought his way through to the legendary Chamber of Secrets where he personally slew Slytherin's Monster, which turned out to be *a Basilisk!* That's right, gentle readers, Salazar Slytherin created a Basilisk and hid it in the bowels of Hogwarts, no doubt for some malign purpose. Fortunately for all

concerned, the Basilisk was only able to petrify rather than kill outright. It was this creature that Gilderoy Lockhart used against our children.

And then, the perfidious Lockhart found an even *worse* way to harm our younglings – turning them against one another. For it turns out that Lockhart had an unwitting accomplice, an innocent student to whom he had passed a book cursed with the darkest of magics, one which Confunded the child so that he would continue with Lockhart's masterplan even after his eviction from Hogwarts. The child's name is currently being withheld for privacy reasons, but authorities assure this reporter that there are no further signs of dark magic affecting the boy, who is the son of a respected Ministry official. In a brief interview conducted via Floo, Peter Pettigrew, solicitor and spokesman for the Potter family had this to say:

*"When the teachers were all petrified and one of Jim's good friends was taken down into the Chamber of Secrets and the Ministry was unable to assist, of course Jim did what he had to do. He is the quintessential Gryffindor, and he does what is right instead of what is easy. The real scandal here is that his heroism came despite months of slander and defamation from across the nation over his Parseltongue gift, one he acquired as a result of his victory over You-Know-Who that saved our nation from destruction. Jim was only able to enter the Chamber of Secrets because he was a Parselmouth, and had he not possessed that gift, or worse, been afraid to use it because of the opprobrium of narrow-minded individuals, disaster would have befallen the entire Hogwarts student body. As Albus Dumbledore is fond of saying, 'It is our choices that define us, not our abilities.' I hope as a result of Jim's heroism, the people of Magical Britain will become more open-minded about Parseltongue which, while unusual, is clearly not inherently evil."*

Mr. Pettigrew reassured the Daily Prophet that Jim is none the worse for wear from his titanic battle against the deadly 100-foot-long Basilisk and that Jim also wanted my readers to know of his personal gratitude to two people who accompanied him to the Chamber to provide moral support: his twin brother, Harry Potter, and First Year Slytherin, Jennifer Weasley.

*For more information about Parseltongue as it is viewed around the rest of the world, see page 7.*

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### ***The Hogwarts Great Hall*** ***8:45 a.m.***

"Jennifer? Jennifer?!" Ginny Weasley exclaimed in disbelief as she read Skeeter's article.

"Hey, at least you're in there," Amy Wilkes replied with a smirk. "I'm not mentioned at all."

Tracy Davis just shook her head. "See! It's like I told you. If you'd just been going by *Ginevra* all this time, they'd have gotten your name right." Astoria Greengrass nodded sagely in agreement while Daphne just shook her head.

The group was soon joined by Harry, Theo, and Blaise all of whom found the article endlessly amusing, as Harry had filled the other two in on everything that had happened down in the Chamber the night before. The specific word *horcrux* went unmentioned, but otherwise Theo and Blaise knew everything of importance.

"Well, well, well," said Daphne Greengrass. "The Silver Trio finally graces us all with their presence."

"The Silver Trio," Theo said incredulously. "Is that really something people call us?"

Blaise laughed. "I like it. I want to get T-Shirts made."

"That can be your project for the summer," Harry said before sitting down opposite Daphne. Casually, he took a small roll of parchment from his pocket and passed it to the girl. She gave him a bemused look and then unrolled it. As she scanned the sheet, her eyebrows rose in surprise. It was a list of everyone in the voting bloc Lady August had quietly assembled in the Wizengamot who supported elevating House Greengrass to Ancient and Noble status ... a list to which House Malfoy and his vassals had been added. She looked up at Harry questioningly, and he winked at her. Without another word, she put the list away.

"Apropos of nothing, where's Draco today?" she asked.

"He didn't come back to the dungeon last night," Theo said. "Apparently, after he was revived, Lord Malfoy took him straight home for a few days. Pansy threw a fit over it."

Their conversation was interrupted when the Boy-Of-The-Hour, Jim Potter himself strode into the Great Hall, and immediately the entire Gryffindor table stood up to give him a standing ovation. He grimaced slightly but then took his seat without comment. In point of fact, the previous night had been rather tense in Gryffindor Tower. When he finally returned to his dorm, it was in the company of Professor McGonagall who read the whole House the riot act over how they'd all turned on Jim and acted like a mob during a moment of crisis. She'd also informed them that Ron Weasley had been influenced by a cursed object given to him by Professor Lockhart the previous summer, that nothing that had happened was his fault, and that anyone

who found bullying Jim or Ron or anyone else in the future would be suspended.

Jim sat down next to Neville and Hermione and started loading eggs and bacon onto his plate.

"So how are you two?" he asked. "Recovered from the petrification?"

"Yes," Hermione replied. "It was a very odd sensation. I remember lots of people screaming and then big yellow eyes ... and the next thing I know, I'm in the Infirmary being fed a potion. I'm just glad we were revived so quickly. Can you imagine if this had lasted until the end of the month and we'd have had no time to revise for exams?!"

Neville laughed. "I'm sure in that case they'd have made some arrangements. Maybe even cancelled exams altogether as a school treat or something."

Hermione looked at him aghast as if he'd suggested cancelling Christmas. Shaking her head, she turned back to Jim. "How's Ron doing?"

The boy shrugged. "He'll stay in the Infirmary for another day or so. There's no sign of any magical damage, but the whole thing was, well, let's just call it traumatic and leave it at that."

Breakfast preceded, but as Jim was leaving the hall for his first class, he noticed a familiar face giving him a dubious look. It was Harry, who stood waiting across the foyer with his arms folded.

"I suppose I should be grateful that the Prophet at least spelled my name right," Harry said drily, "unlike poor Jennifer. And incidentally, it was sixty-feet-long *at most*."

Jim waved his Housemates on and moved over to his brother. Soon, everyone else had gone ahead, leaving the two alone.

"I had nothing to do with all that, Harry. I just told my story to Uncle Pete - well, an edited version - and he passed it along to Skeeter. With ... some embellishments, I suppose. That's Uncle Pete for you. Tell Ginny that I'll be sending a letter to the Prophet this afternoon correcting her name *and* making it clear that you and she gave a lot more help than just moral support. I don't know if it will help. The Prophet's pretty invested in me as the shining golden boy, but I'll do what I can." He studied Harry's expression.

"Are you ... jealous over this article, Harry?" Jim asked hesitantly and with what seemed like a certain amount of embarrassment.

Harry scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course, I'm...." He frowned in consternation. "Alright, yes! I am jealous, okay? You went down to the Chamber with no plan, with no *wand*, and only survived because of help you got from other people, none of whom get any real acknowledgement from your adoring public. You'd have died three times over if Ginny and I hadn't come with you!"

"Yes, I would have," Jim said simply. "Thank you. I haven't really had a chance to say it before, so I'm doing it now. Thank you for saving my life and Ron's. I owe you and Ginny a great deal."

Despite himself, Harry was taken aback by the boy's obvious sincerity. "Yes, well... think nothing of it. If I'd just stood by and let you get killed by Slytherin's Monster, James and Lily would never have let me hear the end of it."

Jim laughed at that, and finally Harry chuckled as well.

"Well, we'd better get to class. Double Potions today. I'm sure Professor Snape will be extra cranky after having been petrified for two days." Harry nodded at his brother and then started down the hall.

"Come home with me, Harry," Jim said suddenly. Harry's head jerked around in surprise.

"What?"

"This summer. Come home to Potter Manor. Or if that won't work – and I guess after that fiasco at Christmas, I can't blame you – ask Lady Longbottom if I can come to visit there for a few weeks."

"Why?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Jim rolled his eyes. "Because you're my *brother*, and I want to get to know you better. I'm tired of us being at each other's throats because of what our parents did to split us up. What you said after that last detention with Lockhart? About how all we can hope for is to not be enemies? I don't accept that. I *want* us to be like brothers. I always have, even if I haven't been brave or honest enough to admit it."

"Always?" Harry said skeptically.

"Always," Jim replied in a firm voice. "Last year, in front of the Mirror of Erised?" He bit his bottom lip. "I didn't see myself as an only child. I saw our whole family together like a *real* family."

Harry said nothing. Jim rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment but then persevered.

"Granted, you were wearing Gryffindor robes and didn't have your hair all, you know, *dandified* like you wear it. But

we are all together, and you and I were like best friends."

Harry remained quiet for a long moment. Then, he closed his eyes and sighed loudly. "Well, in the interests of disclosure, I suppose I can tell you that I saw us all together as well. Except that I was still a Slytherin and everyone was okay with that. Which is a problem because I think getting James Potter to accept a Slytherin son is on par with me getting resorted in terms of possible things."

"So screw James Potter!" Jim said to Harry's shock. "I mean, I love my dad and I always will – even though he's been a right pain all year about me being a Parselmouth – but he was *wrong* to send you away and he was *wrong* to reject you last year. And I was an ass to go along with it like I did. *Brothers should stick together.*"

Harry's eyes widened in visible surprise at his brother's comments. "I'll ... talk to Neville and then send an owl to Lady Augusta. And of course, James will have to sign off on it." Jim nodded appreciatively. Then, Harry looked thoughtful for a moment.

"I tell you what, though. If we're going to work at this *being brothers* thing, can I ask you for a favor?"

Jim looked at him suspiciously but not unkindly. "What?"

"Nothing major, I think. Have you decided what you want to do to Derrick and Bole over the way they jumped you before Christmas?"

The other boy was surprised. "No. Honestly, I'd forgotten all about it. Why?"

"Let me handle them instead. They're just a couple of minions anyway. It's the ringleaders you want."



Jim smirked. "Sure. I leave it to your Slytherin cunning and discretion."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Any time." Jim paused. "Oh, one last thing Harry."

"Yes?"

"Can you undersstand what I'm sssaying now?" Jim hissed.

Harry stared at him blankly. "Was that supposed to mean something?"

Jim laughed. "Just an idea. At the door to the Chamber, you talked like you understood what I said to open the secret passage in Myrtle's bathroom. I've, um, been wondering if you might be a Parselmouth too but just unwilling to admit it."

"Why? Do you think it might ease the pressure on you if your Slytherin brother had the same power?"

"Nah, I just thought it would be cool to have something we could share besides bone structure and a surname. See you in class." He strolled past Harry whistling to himself. To Harry's surprise and amusement, the tune was *God Save the Queen*.

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***Office of the Minister of Magic***  
***2:00 p.m.***

"So there you have it," said Cornelius Fudge to his guest.

"According to the current and incoming Chief Auror, Hogwarts in a time of crisis is generally off-limits to our law enforcement officials until *after* someone has been killed.

Now, I have always had the utmost faith in Albus Dumbledore. But this incident has forced me to face the fact that the man is neither invincible nor infallible. There have been incidents *nearly every year* with the DADA instructor, not to mention the fact that Dumbledore keeps a '*reformed*' Death Eater on staff. And now I find out that if anything goes wrong, the only defense for the future of Wizarding Britain lies in the hands of a bunch of school teachers who would have no backup of any sort until it was too late. It's *intolerable*!"

"I can certainly see why you find these matters upsetting, Minister. But, well I'm sorry, but I still don't understand why *I'm* here. I'm not in law enforcement. I'm just an archivist and a historian from the Department of Magical Education."

"That is *precisely* why you are here! I've looked through your file. Solid grades from Hogwarts. Not spectacular, but very solid. But more importantly, you hold a History of Magic NEWT, which I'm sad to say is somewhat rare. Such a pity that Cuthbert Binns is such an unengaging teacher, but what can one do? No, I've called for you because I *need* an archivist and historian *and* someone with expertise in the field of education. The treaties between Hogwarts and the rest of Magical Britain are *old*. The eldest of them predate the Norman Conquest! I *need* someone who can go through those treaties with a fine tooth comb and find for me any loopholes or ambiguities that will allow the Ministry to exercise greater control of Hogwarts. Our children's future demands nothing less!"

The woman paused before answering slowly. "So ... you want me to begin researching the Hogwarts treaties in addition to my other responsibilities, Minister?"

"No, no, no," he said waving his hand dismissively. "I want to give you a *promotion*! With a commensurate raise of course. You'll work on this full-time and answer only to me. How does the title of Senior Undersecretary to the Minister sound to you, Madam Umbridge."

The plump woman sat up in her chair as her face lit up with a beatific smile. "Senior Undersecretary Umbridge! I *do* like the sound of that, Minister." Then, she tittered softly. "Though I would be just as pleased if you were to call me ... Dolores."

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***Marcus Flint's room***  
**7:00 p.m.**

"You wanted to see us, Captain?" Lucian Bole stepped into Marcus's room with Peregrine Derrick right behind, when the two stopped short. Harry Potter was sitting in a chair next to the prefect and Quidditch captain, and neither looked happy.

"Yeah, Bole, I did. So what's all this crap about you two berks beating the crap out of Jim Potter last term and pretending you were Gryffindors doing it?"

Both boys went pale, but Bole decided to bluff his way out. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Flint," he said defiantly.

Harry sighed loudly. "Jim finally wised up and looked into a pensieve. He knows it was you two and not a pair of Gryffindors."

"Bullshit," Peregrine spat. "We put a bag over his head!" Immediately, Harry and Marcus both closed their eyes and

started massaging their temples while Lucian thumped his friend and partner-in-crime on the back of the head.

"Pensieves combine memories and time magic, Derrick," Harry explained. "Even if Jim was blindfolded, anyone who looks into his memories can see what happened around him. That's why *successful* criminals either wear masks, glamour or disillusion themselves, or don't leave witnesses alive. The only reason you two haven't already gotten expelled is because Jim owed me a favor and gave me a few days to handle it in House. He's a Gryff so he's very big into giving people a chance to '*do the right thing*.'"

"He expects us to *confess*?!" Bole spluttered.

"Yeah, and to McGonagall rather than Snape," Marcus snapped. "You're going to repent of your sins, throw yourselves on her mercy, and *name names*."

"What do you mean?" Derrick asked grimly.

"Oh come on," Harry said. "I think we all know that you two aren't the type to do something like this on your own. You're more the '*hex 'em from behind the bushes*' types. Someone put you up to viciously attacking the Boy-Who-Lived, and you can either give up your mastermind or risk expulsion. So what's it going to be?"

The two Slytherins looked at one another for a second. "It was Warrington," they said in perfect unison.

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### ***The Slytherin Common Room***

***8:30 p.m.***

Cassius Warrington was sitting alone reading when Harry Potter walked up. Warrington practically snarled at the

boy's approach.

"What do you want, *Potter*?" he spat.

"To give you some friendly advice, Warrington," Harry said quietly but firmly. "When the time comes, blame everything on Bonnevie. It's your only chance."

"What are you talking....?" Warrington started to ask, but Harry had already walked off after delivering his warning. Cassius Warrington looked around the room nervously before returning to his reading.

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**11 May 1993**  
**The Headmaster's Office**  
**9:00 a.m.**

Irma Pince sat stiffly in her chair and declined the Headmaster's offer of a sherbet lemon. She had not been in the Headmaster's Office in a very long time. In fact, she had seldom been seen anywhere in the castle outside of the Library in a very long time. Her rooms were attached to the Library, and she even took her meals there from house elves. She didn't care for the Headmaster's Office. While there were a decent number of books on the shelves, the room lacked the oppressively comforting smell of volume upon volume of musty parchment.

"I asked you to meet with me, Madam Pince, because I had a question about one of the books in the Restricted Section. Specifically, about the 1st edition of ***Hogwarts: A History***. I took the opportunity to peruse my own copy of the inventory for the Restricted Section, and I don't see it listed there. I was wondering if you could explain that discrepancy for me."

"Certainly, sir," she said in a voice as dusty as her books. "That volume is customarily kept within that part of the Restricted Section known as the Forbidden Archive."

"The ... Forbidden Archive," Dumbledore said as he studied the reclusive librarian over the top of his spectacles. He had always found Irma Pince an odd duck even by the standards of Hogwarts faculty members. For one thing, other than Binns, she was the only faculty member from his student days who was still on staff, though Binns was a ghost, which Dumbledore thought gave him an unfair advantage when it came to establishing seniority.

"Yes Headmaster," Pince replied in a vaguely condescending tone. "The Forbidden Archive."

"Could you, perhaps, expand on what this ... Forbidden Archive *is*?"

She sniffed softly. "The Forbidden Archive consists of seventeen volumes in the Restricted Section which are kept in a separate location and concealed via powerful Notice-Me-Not Charms. I myself do not personally know what volumes are contained in the Forbidden Archive, as I am subject to a modified Obliviation Charm that causes me to forget about the Forbidden Archive except when the Headmaster specifically inquires about it, and to forget what volumes are in it unless one is specifically asked for by an authorized student or faculty member. I *can* tell you that the total number of volumes is seventeen and the one most recently checked out was ***Hogwarts: A History***, first by Professor Lockhart on March 8th and then one day later by Harry Potter pursuant to a Restricted Section pass he presented and which had been signed by Professor Lockhart.

The Headmaster stared at the woman in amazement. "You have Restricted Books in the Library and you yourself do not know what they are or what information they contain?!" Dumbledore asked incredulously. "Who was responsible for Obliviating you of this knowledge?"

"You, sir," she sadly flatly, "at least with regard to the most recent addition to that section." And with that, she reached into the sleeve of her robe and extracted a rolled parchment which she handed over to the Headmaster. He unfurled the parchment, and his eyes widened even more as he read the contents which were written in his handwriting and on his personal stationary.

TO: A.P.W.B.D.  
FROM: A.P.W.B.D.  
RE: The Forbidden Archive  
DATE: April 1, 1981

*This memo is to confirm that on this date, I added a book which came into my possession to the Forbidden Archive. By the time you read this, I will have Obliviated myself of all knowledge of said book's presence in Hogwarts and will modify the memories of Madam Pince to ensure that the book can only be recovered under special circumstances. Please don't waste a lot of time trying to circumvent these protections. We both know I'm perfectly able to make myself forget something until such time as I need to recall it, so if you don't remember writing this memo, just assume that time has not yet arrived.*

*Oh, and no, this is not an April Fools prank. It is, in fact, a very serious matter of the gravest concern.*

At the bottom of the page were additional words written in a special invisible ink that only Dumbledore could possibly

have read.

*Confirmation Code: Ariana likes woolen socks.*

Dumbledore read the note three times to himself before exhaling loudly and returning it to Madam Pince.

"I do hope I haven't made it a habit of doing things like this to myself," he said with some minor irritation. "It is most vexing to find that one has been outwitted by one's own past."

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### ***Professor McGonagall's Classroom*** ***2:55 p.m.***

The Fifth Year Transfiguration Class was done for the day, and most of the students were already out the door when McGonagall noticed to her surprise that two Slytherins were nervously approaching her desk. It was Bole and Derrick, the two Slytherin beaters.

"Yes, Mr. Bole? Mr. Derrick? Can I help you two gentlemen?"

The boys looked at each other nervously before Bole spoke up.

"Yes, Professor. We'd actually like to speak to you in your capacity as Deputy Headmistress. You see ... Derrick and me, well, we sort of got mixed up in something we shouldn't have. And after everything that's happened this year, we feel really badly about it." Bole licked his lips and summoned up as much sincerity as he could muster. "We want to do the *right thing*."



McGonagall crooked an eyebrow and waited for the boys to continue.

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***Outside the Great Hall***  
***7:00 p.m.***

"Headmaster?" said Mr. Filch in a tight voice. "I was wondering if you knew why it was taking so long to get Mrs. Norris depetrified."

Dumbledore looked surprised. It had been two days since the students and faculty had been revived, and he'd quite forgotten about Mrs. Norris who he now remembered was on a shelf in his office. He'd carried the feline there just a few days after she was petrified on the previous Halloween to study her and see if he could figure out how the magical effect was accomplished. After several futile weeks, however, he was forced to abandon that line of inquiry, and he now remembered to his embarrassment that the kneazle had been left on one of the shelves in his office ever since.

Ten minutes later, Dumbledore entered the Infirmary with the frozen cat under his arm and a seething Argus Filch following behind. Using the Ewer of Hufflepuff, Madam Pomfrey soon revived the cat, which promptly had a sneezing fit due to a thin layer of dust that had accumulated during its time forgotten on a shelf.

*"Thank goodness for the house elves who regularly clean my office,"* Dumbledore thought, *"or the poor thing would be covered in dust an inch thick!"*

Madam Pomfrey cast a quick spell to clean the animal.

"There you are, Argus," Dumbledore said, "right as rain."

"You forgot her," Filch said accusingly. "My only friend in the whole world, and you forgot *all about her!*"

Abashed, Dumbledore tried to apologize. "I am truly sorry, Filch, but after I was revived myself there was simply so much going on...." He never got to complete his apology, as the Caretaker scooped up his cat and strode quickly out of the Infirmary. Dumbledore turned to Pomfrey who gave him a reproachful glare to which he responded with an embarrassed Gallic shrug.

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**12 May 1993**  
**The Potions Classroom**  
**12:45 p.m.**

The interrogation of Cassius Warrington soon led to the joint interrogation of Warrington and Sixth Year prefect Miranda Bonnevie which lasted most of the morning. Present were the Headmaster, McGonagall, and a livid Severus Snape. Weak defenses turned into bitter accusations and blame-shifting. Before everything was said and done, Bonnevie had painted Warrington as the ringleader of a plot to turn Jim Potter into a dark wizard and also that he'd really been behind the prank against the Slytherin Quidditch team for which Lockhart had inexplicably taken the blame. Then, Warrington one-upped her by revealing what he knew about Miranda cheating on her OWLS, about how Miranda had made money on the side illegally selling Pepper-Ups and Calming Draughts she'd illegally brewed to students prepping for exams, and about how her family had blackmailed Selena Harper, a fellow Sixth Year with better grades but a less impressive family tree into declining the prefect's position when it had been offered to her. And such crude blackmail at that! Apparently, Miranda's father had bluntly told Selena's

father that her little brother Niles (who'd just started as a First Year) might not make it make it to his Sorting with both legs attached if Miranda didn't get the prefect's slot.

An hour later, the parents of Miranda and Cassius were in the Headmaster's office as well and were alternately pleading for mercy and threatening legal action against both the school and each other's families. An hour after that, Miranda and Cassius were in their respective dorm rooms packing, while Harry Potter was reading a message that his immediate presence was demanded in Snape's office. As soon as he entered, Snape got straight to the point.

"Miranda Bonnevie has just been expelled. Cassius Warrington has been suspended for the remainder of the school year and will likely have to repeat his Fourth Year. What was your involvement in these outcomes?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but what makes you think I had *any* involvement?"

Snape snorted contemptuously. "These events were set in motion when Peregrine Derrick and Lucian Bole felt compelled to confess their own involvement and ... *do the right thing*, a course of action so wildly out of character that at first I thought they must have been subjected to the Imperius. However, a brief discussion with Marcus Flint revealed that *you* met with them the night before their sudden and otherwise inexplicable turn towards ethical behavior. Now then, I shall ask again and rephrase the question. Since you *are* involved in these matters, I ask you *how* were you involved and *what* were your motives?"

Harry sighed. "I learned by happenstance that Warrington was behind the Quidditch prank and that he'd framed the

Weasley Twins for it. Since I nearly got frostbite out of that, I took it personally. Later, Bonnevie provoked a confrontation with me a few nights ago and suggested that if she became Head Girl next year, she planned to make things difficult for me. When I learned that she was involved in Warrington's idiotic plan to turn Jim Potter into a dark wizard, I saw a shot and took it. To be honest, I'm amazed it worked so much better than I'd anticipated. I figured Slytherin would have just lost a bunch of House points with their names attached and that Miranda might lose her prefect's spot. I never dreamed she'd get kicked out of Hogwarts."

"And Derrick and Bole? They will be in detention for the remainder of the year, though thankfully, they will not lose their Quidditch spots. How did you ensure that they would do as you asked?"

Harry shrugged. "I told them that Jim knew or would soon know that they were the ones who jumped him and that their best bet for avoiding expulsion was to rat out Warrington. They're both fairly easy to predict."

"I've no doubt. I wish to see your memories of that conversation."

Harry nodded and looked around the room. "Do you have a pensieve handy, sir?"

"No," Snape replied while staring intently at the boy. "I wish to review the memory *directly* through your eyes. Will you permit it?"

Harry froze in surprise. Snape wanted to use Legilimency on him without him doing anything to resist other than guiding the man to specific memories and hoping he didn't abuse the privilege.

"Well, Potter? You told me once that you did not fear me knowing your secrets. Is that still the case or not?"

The boy considered Snape's words for a moment before nodding. He did his best to relax his mental shields despite his apprehension, although he did maintain those shields which protected his knowledge about the Prince's Lair and the Hydra. "**LEGILIMENS.**" Instantly, Snape was inside Harry's mind reviewing his interactions with Derrick and Bole. But then, to Harry's surprise, other memories rose to the forefront of his mind, memories connected to those of Bole and Derrick in Marcus's room by tenuous connections Harry didn't immediately understand. He remembered telling Amy Wilkes that he had complete faith in her and earlier saying much the same thing to Draco Malfoy back during the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match. He remembered how with just words he reduced the specter of Tom Riddle to frothing anger and how, the year before, how he'd done the same to Quirrell. Finally, he remembered two of his first year interactions with Snape himself, the conversation in which Snape first introduced him to the concept of Occlumency and the conversation they had at the conclusion of Harry's very first Potions class about his upbringing with the Dursleys and his feelings about the Potters. Finally, Snape withdrew, and Harry reasserted his shields while simultaneously suppressing the sudden burst of anger he felt over Snape meandering through his mind far outside the areas he'd discussed.

"You saw quite a bit more than my conversation with Bole and Derrick ... sir."

Snape did not respond at first. He sat with his elbows propped on his desk and his fingers interlaced together. His head rested against his hands which obscured the lower half of his face. His eyes were focused on Harry's.

"I reviewed your conversations with those two ... which inevitably led me to other similar memories."

"Similar? How so?" Harry's asked with surprise. None of those other memories had anything to do with how he'd manipulated the two Beaters.

Snape didn't answer directly. "Tell me, Potter," he said instead. "What do you know about Legilimency?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Not much beyond what I need to know to defend against it. It's a form of mind-reading that usually requires eye contact."

"Incorrect, or rather, inadequate. The term Legilimency refers to the art of using the mind to acquire information directly rather than through sensory input, while Occlumency refers to the art of using the mind to both organize and conceal information. Like Occlumency, Legilimency is a seven-tiered skill. But while the seven degrees of Occlumency must be learned sequentially, Legilimency is instead a cluster of closely-related skill sets, the most infamous of which allows the Legilimens to directly study the memories of another. I mention this because it is important you understand what you are doing and how, since it seems that you are a natural Legilimens in addition to all your other annoying forms of precociousness."

Harry shook his head. "What makes you think I'm a natural Legilimens, sir?"

"Well for starters, there's the fact that we are presently conversing, yet if you look closely, you will notice that my lips aren't moving."

Shocked, Harry reviewed his recent memories more closely, and sure enough, a closer inspection showed that the last

few things Harry heard from his mentor had not been spoken aloud.

"You're projecting your thoughts to me?"

"I am allowing my unfiltered thoughts to be heard, Potter. And you are receiving them. I first suspected you might have latent Legilimency powers in November of your first year when you intentional broadcast a thought to me just to see if I could hear it. That is actually a common and useful Legilimency trick that allows two people trained with the skill to communicate non-verbally. I understand you did the same thing with the Headmaster the other night. That trick can *only* be done if both parties to the communication are Legilimens, although it can, obviously, be done with minimal or even no training. That was in part why I chose to offer you preliminary Occlumency instruction that day. Aside from the need to protect your thoughts from the Dark Lord, it was essential for you to develop a basic competency with Occlumency before you began to develop your Legilimency beyond the foundational level. Poor Occlumency technique can endanger your own mind. Poor Legilimency technique threatens the mind of everyone around you who thinks thoughts of which you disapprove."

Harry wiped his hand across his face as he sought to process this.

"Professor Snape, I've never had any experience I can recall in which I read someone else's thoughts."

"As I said, Potter, Legilimency is a cluster of interconnected but disparate skill sets of which mind-reading is only the most advanced and difficult. You may not yet have the power to read thoughts directly, but you show clear signs of two other common foundational skills. First, you have the

magical equivalent of what Muggles would describe as '*deductive genius*.' You analyze your surroundings and especially the words, reactions, and body language of those around you and synthesize those observations with seemingly trivial and unrelated prior observations in order to make remarkable intuitive leaps. It was this characteristic that led you as a mere First Year to realize that Voldemort was not only alive but actively possessing Quirrell. If you review your memories, you will no doubt recall other occasions in which you had sudden epiphanies as your mind assembled seemingly random facts into a coherent body of evidence."

Harry nodded slowly. Immediately, he thought of two: his realization in the Infirmary that Lucius Malfoy had given the Diary to Ginny Weasley and his later realization that Gilderoy Lockhart had actually been Regulus Black who was a Metamorphmagus.

"And the other skill?"

"You have a natural facility for manipulating people into doing what you want simply through the power of spoken words."

"I... what?!"

"Don't be coy, Potter. After I realized that you had a talent for Legilimency during your first year, I immediately realized that you had the skill of which I speak because you had previously used it *twice on me* without my realizing it at first!"

Harry stared in shock. "When?!"

"The first incident occurred at the end of your very first Potions class. At the start of that class, I was frankly inclined



to hate you on principle simply because of your resemblance to your father combined with the personal umbrage I took from the idea of a Potter having been Sorted into my House. But as you were leaving, you *just happened* to say all the right things to divert my anger away from yourself and in such a way that I was offended on your behalf by your parents' abandonment of you. You did the same thing the following Halloween after the troll incident. As we left the bathroom for the dungeon, I was furious with you and inclined to dock you House points. While en route to the dormitory, you revealed your observations about Quirrell and about the Cerberus in such a manner that I became impressed by your intellect, your poise, and your sense of wit, so much so that I ended up *giving* points instead of taking them."

"Professor Snape, I *promise* you, I never *intentionally* ...."

"Of course you didn't, foolish boy. Do you not understand what I am saying? This aspect of your power is entirely passive and uncontrolled. You do nothing at all to the person against whom you use this skill. You simply study them and intuitively know what to say in order to naturally instill within them the mindset you desire. *That* is why it is essential that you accelerate your Occlumency training this summer and that you also begin formal Legilimency training. Because according to the Headmaster, you casually used this power on Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley to induce them to end a 200-year-old blood feud and *did not even realize that you were doing so*. And what's more, you recklessly did so in front of Albus Dumbledore *and* Rufus Scrimgeour, both of whom realized at once what you had done. *You are getting noticed*, Harry Potter. Noticed by people who remember the *last* wizard to publicly display such facility with both Occlumency and Legilimency."

"*Voldemort*," Harry said in a soft voice.

Snape nodded with a grave expression. "There were *reasons* why so many otherwise intelligent wizards and witches flocked to the banner of the Death Eaters despite the incoherent bigoted nonsense underlying their philosophy. By the end of the War, a sizeable percentage of those who *opposed* the Dark Lord nevertheless agreed with him on the '*natural inferiority of Mudbloods*' because of the power of his persuasion. A power you seem to mimic."

Harry kept his face free of emotion as he assimilated this information. "What would you have me do?" he finally asked.

"You have a tutor already, Potter. A good one I am told though his identity is hidden. Discuss with him a training regimen for the summer to learn to control these powers. To learn to use them effectively and to learn how *not* to use them when doing so is detrimental or dangerous."

"Dangerous, sir?" Harry asked with a tight voice.

"Yes, Potter, Dangerous. Or have you forgotten that last fall you gave Draco Malfoy a pep talk during the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match that *inspired him to use the Suicide Slam maneuver in a student competition?*"

Harry went pale. He'd thought he was simply giving words of encouragement to a teammate. Only now that Snape was connecting the dots did Harry realize how much of a realignment had taken place in Draco's attitude over the past year. Then, a shudder went down his back when he recalled that night in the Prince's Lair after the first year Easter Break. Up until that night, Olivia Kolumbiko and he had exchanged less than a dozen words, yet after ten minutes in the Lair, she was ready to kill at his command!

Granted, she seemed more in awe of the Hydra Throne itself than the impudent firstie who sat in it, but even that gave credence to Snape's claims – even before Olivia entered the Lair, he'd known about her ancestor who'd been Prince and suspected she might be suitably awestruck by the whole experience. Then, a nasty thought entered his mind.

"Professor Snape, could these ... abilities ... have anything to do with my ... my *Muggle problem*?"

Snape spoke carefully. "I personally cannot see how. If anything, you should be able to manipulate Muggles even more easily than wizards and witches, since there is no possibility of them having any form of psychic defense. That said, your *Muggle problem*, as you call it, is so unprecedented that I cannot exclude any possible cause at this time."

Harry physically winced at Snape's use of the word "*manipulate*." He *loathed* mind control as a concept. The idea of twisting someone into doing something against their nature was sickening to him, partly because of how some inexplicable effect caused ordinary Muggles to a cruel hatred for him on sight, but also because of how a simple Confundus had tricked Neville and Hermione almost to their deaths the year before and how a pair of cursed mind-altering books had caused even worse havoc this past year. Then, an even worse thought occurred to him as another memory from his first days at Hogwarts popped into his head.

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*"I have three conditions, Mr. Longbottom " said Harry somewhat imperiously. " One: we do not sit anywhere near my brother unless absolutely necessary. "*

*"O...okay, um, Mr. Potter, " stammered the nervous boy.*

*Harry took a step forward. " Two: From now on, you keep your chin up, you look people straight in the eye, and you always speak with confidence, whether you feel it or not. Because you are Longbottom of Longbottom, Heir Presumptive to an Ancient and Noble House. Just as I am Potter of Potter. And if the two of us are going actually earn the legacies our family names have left us, we 'd both better get started now."*

*And with that, he put his hand out. " And Three: You call me Harry. "*

*Neville blinked several times. Then, he straightened his back, took a deep breath, and shook Harry' s hand. " Just as you will call me Neville, I hope. " Harry smiled. He wasn' t sure, but he could have sworn the boy just grew an inch-and-a-half.*

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And so Neville had. He wouldn't complete his transformation until after the troll incident at Halloween, but it had *started* the first week of school with Harry's three conditions that had been offered as way to gain an ally ("*Or maybe a minion?*" whispered the most Slytherin part of his brain) instead of a friend. Harry looked up at Snape who gazed at him impassively.

"Well, Potter? Something is on your mind. Out with it."

Harry froze. How could he ask Snape about this? But if not Snape, who else?

"My friends, Professor. Neville, Theo, Hermione, Blaise, Marcus, and others. Are ... are they *really* my friends? Or did I just ... *make them* like me?"

"Potter ... Harry... you have not been *making anyone* do anything against their will. This power is not like the Imperius or even the Confundus. It doesn't directly do *anything* to those you affect. The change is *within you* as you intuitively sense how to act and what to do and say to achieve the desired effect. You must learn to control it so that you do not use it in unintended ways that lead to unintended results. But there was already something inside of Draco Malfoy that was capable of using an insanely reckless Quidditch maneuver to secure victory. You simply ... unleashed it."

Unfortunately, whatever this effect was called, it seemed obvious that Severus Snape didn't have it, as his desire to raise Harry's spirits failed completely.

"I see. Thank you, sir, for bringing all this to my attention. I'll discuss this with my Occlumency tutor this summer. Was there anything else?"

Snape hesitated and then shook his head and sent the boy on his way. Harry trudged back to the Slytherin dungeons, his thoughts in turmoil beneath his flawlessly composed mask. For ten years living with the Dursleys, he'd thought he didn't have a friend in the world. Now, for the first time since coming to Hogwarts, he worried that he might not have a single friendship that was real.

# Goodbyes

## Chapter Notes

Updated on 12/5/2020 to correct the formatting errors present in the original post, tweak some flavor text in the Dobby scene, and remove two words in order to set up a plot point from Year 4.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE SECRET ENEMY**

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**Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.**

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**AN 0:** This chapter was finally updated on November 14, 2020 to correct formatting issues caused by a glitch in ff.n. No real substantive changes, but a few lines of dialogue were tweaked. Only one of them was plot relevant and that's really just to set up something in a chapter that's likely several *years* in the future.

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## **CHAPTER 48: Goodbyes**

***13 May 1993  
The Great Hall  
8:00 a.m.***

On Thursday, it was the Slytherins' turn to applaud (though far more politely than the rambunctious Gryffs had for Jim

Potter the previous Monday) as Draco Malfoy entered the Great Hall for breakfast. He glanced over at the Hufflepuff table and nodded almost imperceptibly at Justin, who nodded back with the same level of discretion. Then, the Malfoy Heir made his way to the middle of the Slytherin table where he took a seat by himself. Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other in surprise at their mutual snubbing, at which point they both noticed that Pansy Parkinson had not come down for breakfast yet.

"Draco," said Harry evenly from a few feet away. "Welcome back."

"Thank you," the boy said. "My father sends his regards." At that, several nearby Slytherins looked at one another sharply.

"Please tell him I return them," Harry replied.

"Are you free this afternoon after lunch?" Draco asked as he started loading his plate. "There are some matters I wish to discuss with you."

"Of course. We, um, don't actually have a DADA class anymore - it's been cancelled for the remainder of the year - so that hour's free."

Draco nodded and ate quietly by himself.

The sight of the boy who had once been such a social animal now sitting alone caused a quiet buzz among the Slytherins which only ended when something even more unusual happened. An enormous horned owl with black and gold plumage of a breed none of the students had ever seen before swooped through the window and down towards the Gryffindor table to land in front of Jim Potter. The boy s

surprise was exceeded only by that of his housemate, Parvati Patil.

"That s my Uncle Gupta's owl, Indra!" she exclaimed. "Why is my uncle sending you owls all the way from India?!"

Jim ignored the girl while taking the message from the owl's talon. After tossing the great raptor a slice of bacon, he watched it fly off and then opened the letter. He read over it carefully twice before turning to look up at his mother who was sitting at the faculty table staring at him in surprise.

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### ***Twenty minutes later in Lily Potter s Office***

"You want to go to India!" Lily said in shock.

"Yes, Mum, I want to go to India," he replied almost placidly. "Gupta Baskar is the uncle of two of my classmates. He's also one of the most respected healers in the world and someone who taught himself how to speak Parseltongue. And he's invited me to India for a month this summer to study with him."

"Study *what*, exactly?" she asked suspiciously.

"Parseltongue, for a start. He wants to spend time talking with a natural Parselmouth to see if there's any differences that might change how Parselmagic might work for us."

"Parsel-*magic*?"

"Yeah, apparently there are some spells you can say in Parseltongue. Mainly healing spells, but also a few combat spells. Actually, pretty much any spell that has a lot of S's in the incantation."



"I don't know about this, Jim. After everything that's happened, do you really want to ... *flaunt* your Parseltongue like this?"

"I'm not *flaunting* it, Mum! I'm just ... refusing to live in fear of it." The boy looked away for a few seconds. "There's another reason I want to go. Actually, two reasons. Gupta Baskar isn't just a celebrated healer. He's also a celebrated mind healer. I ... need to see one, I think. And if I can go to one who lives on the other side of the world instead of somebody here that just sees me as the Boy-Who-Lived, that's ... that's better right?"

Lily was silent for a moment. "And what's the other reason?"

"You can't tell anyone about this, okay? Please?"

Lily nodded.

"It's about Ron."

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***The Prince's Lair***  
***1:30 p.m.***

Harry and Draco sat across from one another in the Lair. The Hydra was quiet at the moment, though Harry knew it was observing. He was more concerned with the mood of his rival and "frenemy" Malfoy. In addition to the trauma of his recent petrification, Harry was aware that the boy was also faced with two parents in the midst of what would surely be an acrimonious divorce (which was itself an extremely rare event in wizarding culture). However, he elected to let the other boy speak first, though he was bursting with curiosity. Draco had been avoiding Crabbe

and Goyle all day, and Pansy had apparently spent a lot of time crying piteously in her dormitory.

"Well," said Draco finally. "How much do you already know?"

Harry coughed. "Very little."

"Mother and Father are *divorcing*," he said in a tone suggesting the word was something vulgar. "The first morning in the Manor, they let me sleep in and then '*explained*' things over brunch. Father was keeping the Manor and all of its moveables since it was entailed, but Mother was entitled to seventy-five percent of the assets in his vaults. I was given a choice - live with Mother elsewhere '*in the lifestyle to which I'd become accustomed*' or stay with Father in '*reduced circumstances*.' Father made it clear that whatever I decided, I would still be his son and I would always have a place at Malfoy Manor." He paused. "Mother ... just looked at me."

He paused and looked away for a moment. "I chose Father. Mother didn't take it well."

"*Had you chosen me, Draco Heir to the House of Malfoy,*" Narcissa said in a chilling voice, "*I would have destroyed any rival, smashed any barrier, even defied the Dark Lord himself, whatever it took to assure your greatness. But you have chosen mediocrity.*"

She turned to sneer at her now-ex-husband at that last word. Lucius simply smiled at her almost genially. Then, she rose from her chair and headed for the door, stopping to turn back one last time.

"*Still, it is best that we clarify things now,*" she said to her only son. "*I am still young, after all. I have plenty of time to have more children.*"

And with that, Narcissa Black cut Draco loose and walked away.

"Ouch," Harry said with a wince. "Draco, I'm very sorry, especially if you feel that this was in any way my fault."

"Oh, shut up, Potter!" Draco said acidly. "Not *everything* is about you. I made my decision - lots of decisions, actually - and I'll live with the consequences. Right now, all I care about is winning the Quidditch Cup, since I don't know if I'll get to play Seeker again next year."

Harry blinked in confusion. "Why would you not be our Seeker next year?"

Draco hesitated thereby indicating that the news was unpleasant. "Because I won't be here next year. I'm transferring to Durmstrang in the fall."

"*Durmstrang!*?"

"Oh, calm down. It won't be that bad. From what Father says, the British seriously overplay how, um, *evil* Durmstrang is. They're quite a bit more aggressive when it comes to introducing potentially dangerous spells, and they offer a lot of classes that might make Dumbledore recoil in horror, but believe it or not, they have a Muggle Studies program that puts ours to shame."

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it, unsure of how to respond to that.

"More importantly," Draco continued, "the Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff, owes Father a life debt which presents some, shall we say, opportunities for advancement."

"I'm sure." Harry paused again, still somewhat speechless. "Is it true they don't allow Muggleborns at Durmstrang?"

Draco shrugged. "It's a bit more complicated than that. They don't really have Muggleborns over in that part of Europe, at least as we understand it. It's been government policy for centuries in most of the Eastern European nations that when Muggleborns first show magic, they get taken from their families who are all Obliviated into thinking that their children died. The Muggleborn child, who is usually very young, gets Obliviated of all memories of growing up among Muggles and then fostered out to a good wizarding home and raised just like any other wizarding child. Somewhat ironically, it's called *the Slytherin Solution*."

"That's ... kind of horrible," said Harry. Draco crooked an eye at him.

"Says the guy who, if the rumors are true, spent years locked in a boot cupboard by his magic-fearing Muggle guardians."

Harry grimaced. "That's not fair. I'm ... not a typical case."

Draco laughed at that. "No, Harry, I don't suppose you are."

The other boy shook his head. "So why does your Father want you to start over again in a new school somewhere hidden in the trackless wastes of Eastern Europe?"

"Well, for one thing, Father thinks I should avoid Britain for a while. He has concerns about how Mother may respond to my decision." He smiled to Harry's amazement. "It's funny. All these years, and I never really grasped how unstable she was. That she'd be capable of ... *turning* like that."

Draco took a deep breath. "But ultimately the decision was mine, and I decided ... that *you were right*."

"I was? What about?"

"Last year on the train when we were on our way to Hogwarts. I *did* make a poor first impression, one that lasted for most of last year. I want to start over. Someplace where I have a prestigious name and, let's face it, *incredible hair*, but where I don't have the Black baggage hanging over me. I want to try actually being a Malfoy for a change."

Harry nodded at that. "So how does this affect Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy? You seemed to be avoiding them at breakfast, and I haven't even seen Pansy today."

"Well, in light of Father's '*reduced circumstances*,' he's informed those families that he will reevaluate whether to continue holding them as vassals when the oaths have to be reaffirmed next January. I think he wants to see how they react if it appears he won't be able to afford their Wizengamot fees. Which, just between us, he can - our '*circumstances*' aren't nearly as '*reduced*' as Mother thinks they are - but I think he wants to see if there's any actual loyalty there or just money-grubbing. We're both pretty sure that the Parkinsons will want out of the marriage contract I have with Pansy, which is why she's been wailing all morning. So ... there's ***that*** at least."

The other boy absorbed that while considering the implications. If Malfoy couldn't continue to maintain the fealty agreement with the Goyles (or if the Goyles just *believed* that to be the case), it might accelerate Lord Goyle's plan to sell Amy Wilkes off in marriage to Tiberius Nott, which meant that Harry might need a more

permanent solution to that problem sooner than he'd thought. He filed that away for later consideration.

"So when are you leaving?" he asked.

"August," Draco replied. "About two weeks before you board the Hogwarts Express, I'll be boarding the Occidental Express to Vienna and then take a connecting train to Durmstrang. But don't worry though. Theo will still be spending the summer with us."

"Thank you." The boy hesitated, unsure of what to say. "I'm ... sorry that your Mum is ... *you know*."

Draco smirked as he rose to head for the door. "I'm sorry that pretty much your entire family is ... *you know*."

Harry snorted softly. "Fair enough, Draco."

"Please, Harry ... call me *Drake*."

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***14 May 1993***  
***The Second Year Slytherin Dorms***  
***3:00 a.m.***

While the other five boys in the dorm room slept peacefully, Harry had his bed curtains drawn with a Muffliato preventing his whispers from being heard and a soft Lumos illuminating the Marauders Map as he perused it. He'd spent the last two hours studying the Map's features and making notes of the many secret passages that he'd never known about before, while also pumping the four personalities within the Map for information. He'd deduced that the Marauders were actually James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin, and that they'd

copied an imprint of their respective personalities onto the thing.

The parallels between the Map and the Diary were slightly alarming, but after a while, he was able to get the quartet to reveal the Charms used for copying a simplified version of one's personality into an inanimate object. The most important one was the Homunculus Charm, which wasn't even a restricted spell. It was actually one of the primary Charms used in creating moving portraits, and while it was a very difficult Charm to master, it was also widely practiced, albeit not often by students. In other words, Riddle's basic trick of copying his personality into the Diary wasn't actually that impressive beyond how young he was when he pulled it off successfully. His real feat had been expanding the Charm's effects so that the Diary could organize the information written within for him. The Diary's more dangerous and insidious powers only came later after the horcrux was inserted.

This suggested to Harry that not all of the horcruxes might be sentient or at least not imbued with an actual personality based on Riddle's own, since the Homunculus Charm apparently allowed for only one imprinted object to exist per person at any given time. Arguably, the Marauders were actually somewhat foolish for having created the Map at a young age and then losing it - so long as the Map existed, neither James Potter nor any of his friends could ever have a moving portrait of themselves commissioned.

Harry had also learned the four Marauders nicknames - Prongs, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Moony - though they wouldn't explain to him the origins of the nicknames, saying that it was something for Son of Prongs to learn on his own. The Marauders still believed that Harry was James's only son and a Gryffindor to boot, which in Harry's mind was

simply a matter of dumbing down his vocabulary and pretending to be awestruck by his father's cleverness. And to be fair, the Map was a remarkable piece of enchantment, especially for one created by such young wizards. He'd been unable to get Prongs to say anything more about why a Slytherin Sorting would be such a "*disaster*," so he'd spent the rest of the time asking questions about what things were like back during their school days. It was clear all four Marauders disliked Severus Snape with varying degrees of intensity: seething hatred on the part of Padfoot, strong dislike and contempt from Prongs, mere disdain from Wormtail, and apparent disinterest from Moony. "Apparent" disinterest because Harry felt quite certain that Moony simply did not want to talk about Snape for some reason and was uncomfortable when his three friends persisted in doing so.

Finally, Harry yawned loudly and decided that was enough for one night, so he said his good nights to the Marauders. Tomorrow, he would meet with the Weasley Twins and make his offer. He'd considered simply keeping the Map and pretending he didn't know what had happened to it, but he found that unfeasible for two reasons. First, Ron probably remembered stealing the thing and keeping it in the same bag where Harry had found the Potter Cloak (which he had already returned to Jim). Second, every time he thought about doing so, he suddenly had a vivid mental image of George Weasley's earnest trusting face as he was getting ready to cast the Protego Orbis that saved them both from certain death in Greenhouse #3.

"*Stupid life debt!*" Harry muttered to himself. Not that it mattered too much. He'd already done everything he needed with the Map for the remainder of the year, as the set of poisonous Basilisk fangs deposited in a locked box within the Prince's Lair attested. Harry started to



deactivate the Map but then froze in surprise at an unexpected sight - two pairs of feet standing very close together in a broom closet on the Fourth Floor. According to the Map, they belonged to *Emily Rossum and Marcus Flint*! Harry barked out a laugh and then looked around in sudden embarrassment before he remembered the Muffliato. Smiling, he touched his wand to the parchment.

*Mischief managed.*

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***15 May 1993***

***An empty classroom***

***1:30 p.m.***

Fred and George Weasley entered the room together to find Harry waiting for them sitting behind a desk. He'd had to rush to make this meeting, as the package from Artie had only arrived via owl ten minutes earlier.

"Blimey," said George. "I feel like we've been called in to the Headmaster's Office."

"So what's up, our ickle snakey friend?" said Fred.

Harry directed them to two chair set on the other side of the desk. "I asked you here, gentlemen, because I have a business proposal for you two."

"Go on," they said in perfect unison.

Harry reached into the left inside pocket of his robe and pulled out an official-looking envelope. "This envelope contains a Gringotts bank draft made out in the amount of 200 galleons and payable to Fred and George Weasley."

The Twins laughed. "Pull the other one, Harry." "It plays the accordion."

Harry just smiled. "Open it." George did so and immediately his eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

"Blimey," he muttered in a dazed voice. Then, he looked up at Harry almost fearfully. "You're not gonna ask us to ... *kill* somebody or something like that, are you?"

Harry laughed and shook his head no. "So that s Option #1. Option # 2 is you forego the bank draft and instead reclaim this completely different piece of paper which I'm sure you recognize." He reached into his other pocket and pulled out the Map before placing it on the table.

"Where did you get that?" Fred said, his face darkening.

"From Ron's book-bag. He was the one, after all, who stole it from you under cover of a Slytherin prank while under the control of the cursed diary. I've had it since Sunday night. It's a really nice bit of spellwork. May I ask how you acquired it?"

Fred made a face. "We made it!"

Harry shook his head again. "Fred, let's all keep things above-board, okay? I know the Map was created by the Marauders, a quartet of Gryffindor pranksters from the mid-1970 s who went by the names of Prongs, Moony, Padfoot, and Wormtail. I also know that Prongs was actually James Potter, which means that as his Heir, I actually have a legal claim to this as a family heirloom, but you two have had possession for a while, so I'm willing to pay, well, let's call it ... *a recovery fee*. I merely wanted to know how it came into your possession."

Fred started to say something rude when George interrupted. "We found it in a drawer in Filch's office when we had detention there one night. Are you really offering us 200 galleons for it?"

"Yep. So what will it be, the Map or the Money?"

"The Map!" "The Money!" The Twins looked at each other in shock. It was the first time they could remember in which their twin-speak had failed them and led each of them to say the exact opposite of what the other wanted.

"Fred! We can use that money! We've been talking about a joke shop since the day we started school, and 200 galleons can get us started!"

"But ... it's *the Map*! I mean, we've had that for ages. We use it for every prank we pull!"

Harry coughed. "Far be it from me to interfere with your activities. As I've said many times, I'm a big fan of your work. I would be willing in the future to loan the Map out to you if you need it for any pranking for, say, five galleons a day?"

"That's an outrage!" exclaimed Fred. "The nerve! Charging us to use our own property!"

George gave a loud exasperated sigh. "Harry, would you excuse us for a moment while we have a quick discussion followed by me thumping my brother upside the head?"

Harry laughed. "Sure." The two Gryffindors rose and moved to the far side of the room where they began a heated but whispered argument. Harry leaned back in his chair. He could afford to be patient. After all, he had budgeted up to 500 galleons for this transaction.

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**30 May 1993**

**By the shore of Black Lake**

**4:45 p.m.**

Drake Malfoy's last Quidditch match at Hogwarts turned out to be a bittersweet experience. Cedric Diggory caught the Snitch, depriving Malfoy of an undefeated season as Seeker, but it was a moot point as the Snitch didn't even appear until ninety minutes into the game. By that point, the Snakes had a more than 200-point lead over the Badgers whose hapless young Keeper was defenseless against the unstoppable Slytherin Chaser machine. Diggory was almost perfunctory about catching the Snitch, which was more an act of mercy for his team rather than the usual victory condition.

With that win, Slytherin had clinched the House Quidditch Cup, though they, like the Gryffindors, were far out of the running for the House Cup. To everyone's surprise, it seemed this year's House Cup was headed for the Hufflepuffs mainly due to a 100-point award to Bobby Lattimer for exhibiting "*cool resolve under pressure*" in following James Potter's instructions and keeping the majority of the student body sealed up in the Great Hall while the other prefects were busy leading an angry mob after Jim Potter. Harry should have felt badly about Slytherin's loss, but since the nail in their collective coffin came from the point loss that accompanied Miranda's expulsion and Cassius's suspension, he considered it to be a fair exchange.

Later that afternoon after Harry had changed, he met Neville and Theo out near the Lake by their usual tree. Harry was pensive. He'd been stewing over what Snape said to him about his natural Legilimency for weeks, and he

felt he had to get it off his chest with the two boys who he now thought of as brothers. He set up a Muffliato, which showed that it was something Harry thought was serious, but they both knew to let him take his time in saying what it was. Finally, Harry revealed what Snape had said and reminded them of conversations back in First Year where, looking back, he felt that he might have unintentionally manipulated them in order to win their friendship. The two boys regarded him silently.

"Well," he said after a gulp. "Say something? Please?"

"Okay," said Theo. "You re an *idiot*." Harry looked shocked while Neville bit back a laugh. "First of all, I'm a better Occlumens than you could possibly be a Legilimens at this point, so I don't believe for a second you could have psychically manipulated me into something I didn't want. Second, what exactly do you think you did to me? You told me you were my friend which got me to loan you the magic ring that you didn't even know I had at the time, and you gave me moral support in front of the Mirror of Erised that helped me get past seeing my mother's murder. I don't *care* if you did it with some weird mind trickery as opposed to just being my friend as long as when it comes down to it, *you really are my friend!*"

Harry thought on that as he turned to Neville. The other boy said nothing at first, but he instead popped his wand out of his holster and pointed it at the ground nearby. "**EXPECTO PATRONUM.**" There was a flash of silvery light which resolved itself into Neville's Patronus, a medium-sized silver bear which looked around almost angrily.

"It's okay, Elby. I'm not in danger. I just wanted to prove a point." He turned to the others.

"This is Elby, by the way," he said proudly. "I don't know if I ever told you his name."

The bear ambled over to the group. Theo, who hadn't seen the Patronus before, reached out to touch it in wonder. The spirit creature was so well-defined that he could run his fingers through its hair.

"I *really* want to learn that spell," Theo said. Neville smiled and then let the Patronus dissipate.

"Harry, you're worried that you might have influenced me to be your friend back during our first week at school. Do you remember what I was like back then? Timid, broken down, certain I was a squib, and afraid of my own shadow? Do you think that little boy could have ended up one of the top students in our class? That he'd someday have students who were years ahead coming to him with Herbology questions? That he'd one day become *the youngest wizard in recorded history to have a Patronus*?"

Neville shook his head. "Harry, *I like me*. Two years ago, I didn't think I'd ever be able to say that. Whether you did that to me with accidental Legilimency or just by deciding that I had something buried inside that you could drag to the surface *doesn't matter to me*. I'm grateful either way."

"And I'll bet we're not the only ones," Theo said. "Do you think Hermione would be angry if your suggestion that she learn about wizarding culture so she could fit in and make friends was reinforced with Legilimency? Do you think Marcus would be angry that *you turned his life around for the better* with magic instead of just a few words of encouragement and support?"

"Okay, okay," said Harry with a certain amount of relief. "But still, I'm worried that I could have used this power to

hurt people." Theo rolled his eyes.

"Well even if you did - and I *doubt* it - you couldn't have known any better because you didn't know this was something you could do. If you're that worried about it, master this power so that it only works when you want it to. I mean, *honestly*! How can it be *bad* that you get people to do things that need doing by telling them how much faith you have in them and *acting like a true friend*?"

"Hear, hear," said Neville supportively.

Harry considered all that and relaxed.

"Mind you," Neville said. "If you ever use this power to influence me into doing something *I shouldn't*, Gran will beat you to death with a paper napkin."

Theo perked up. "*Can* you beat someone to death with a paper napkin?"

Harry smirked. "If I know Augusta Longbottom, she'll have fun trying," he said. The trio laughed at that as the sun slowly descended over Black Lake.

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**2 June 1993**  
**DMLE Headquarters**  
**9:00 a.m.**

Mad-Eye Moody looked down at the picture accompanying the Daily Prophet article with an amused expression. Well, as amused as his scarred face could manage, anyway.

**JAMES POTTER SWORN IN AS NEW CHIEF AUROR.**

Potter's hair was as wild as usual for him, but his appearance was otherwise dignified and professional as he shook Minister Fudge's hand and smiled for the camera at his investiture the previous day. The Auror wadded up the paper and tossed it into the trash before returning to the job of packing up the personal possessions from his office into boxes. There was a soft knock on the frame of his open door. Naturally, it was James Potter himself, the Man of the Hour.

"What can I do for you, Chief Auror?" Moody said.

"For a start, Alastor, you could call me James since you're no longer a subordinate here in the office," Potter said. "That is, assuming you're really bent on leaving and there's nothing I can do to persuade you to stay."

"I'm really bent on leaving and there's nothing you can do to persuade me to stay ... Potter."

James sighed and entered the office, closing the door behind him. "Moody, if you're really going to do this, at least tell me one thing. What did I do?"

"Pardon?"

"When I was a trainee, you were hard on me, but you also praised me for my potential. When I was a rookie working beside you during the war, you were my mentor. Over the next ten years or so, you were a co-worker, and I like to think you also became a friend. It's only been the last few years that you've treated me like something that offends you by breathing. So please, tell me what I did to offend you, and I'll make it right."

Moody stared at the young man who had indeed become a friend and trusted coworker, as well as a damned fine Auror



despite his privileged background. Potter's rise had been meteoric, just as Moody had predicted when he'd graduated from the Academy with stellar grades. It was hard for him to believe that once upon a time, he'd been looking forward to serving under Potter's command when he inevitably became Chief Auror. The room was silent save for the whirling of the grizzled warrior's magic eye.

"I had a sister once," he said without elaboration.

James was surprised. "I never knew that."

"Few people do. She was a squib, and when she turned eleven, my parents sent her away. I was six at the time. Aside from missing her to this very day, I spent every night from the age of six to eleven terrified that I wouldn't get a Hogwarts letter and I'd get thrown out too."

James said nothing, and Moody returned to his packing, speaking over his shoulder as he did.

"You had an obligation as a father, Potter. You abandoned it for reasons I found inadequate. Do you think I need a stronger reason for my feelings about you?"

"No," James said quietly. "I don't. I'm sorry I let you down." He turned and put his hand on the door handle.

"I'm not the one you should apologize to," Moody said, still without looking at the man.

"I know." James left the office without another word.

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***6 June 1993***  
***The Hogwarts Library***  
***4:00 p.m.***

"I can't believe you talked me into this," Harry snapped.

"Oh come on," whispered Neville. "You want to explore your Legilimency powers. Here's your chance."

Harry glared at his friend. He had wanted to explore and learn to master his powers, but in a controlled situation. Instead, Neville wanted him to *mind-whammy* (as the Gryffindor had started referring to it) a fellow student! Since the Chamber of Secrets incident was resolved, Ron Weasley had been in a state of severe depression. More recently, Jim had received an unprecedented invitation to spend the summer in India with Healer Gupta Baskar, and he apparently wanted Ron to accompany him, mainly because Baskar was a noted mind healer and Jim thought Ron needed that right now. The boy balked, however, certain his family couldn't afford for him to spend the summer in India and also far too proud to accept charity from the Boy-Who-Lived. Neville had come to Harry with a request that he talk to Ron and persuade his fellow Gryffindor to put away his pride and accept the chance to get healing.

And so it came to pass that Harry took a break from exam review to follow Neville to the Library and talk with Ron Weasley, a boy he'd never particularly cared for in the past and who rather recently had sought to kill him. Admittedly, it had been while he was possessed by Tom Riddle, but Harry still thought it was the sort of thing he was entitled to hold a grudge over. But it was Neville, and like Hermione and Theo, Harry generally found himself unable to deny his friend's sincere requests. Harry braced himself and walked across the Library to the table where Ron sat by himself while studying Potions notes with a somewhat morose expression.

"Hi, Ron. May I join you?"

Ron looked up in surprise. "Sure," he said after a moment's hesitation.

"Listen, I've been meaning to check in with you to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine," Ron said tersely.

"I'm sure you are, Ron, but it was still a traumatic event, and I just wanted to say..."

"Please don't apologize," Ron said interrupting.

Harry paused, his mouth hanging open. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I said '*please don't apologize.*' I know that in the Chamber you were about to kill me. I don't remember much, but I do recall that pretty clearly. And I don't blame you for it. I had a piece of..."

Ron stopped and glanced around the Library. "Well, *you know* what was inside of me. If there was any chance you could kill him for good by killing me, it would have been completely right to do. I don't blame you at all. Now, was there anything else?"

Harry sat staring at the other boy for nearly five seconds as he processed what Ron had said and considered possible responses. He decided for the "*brutally direct*" approach.

"You want to die, don't you?"

"What?" Ron said in shock. "No, I ..."

"Yes. Yes, I really think you do. I think you were possessed by a monster and made to do things that you're now

ashamed of and rather than face what you were forced to do, accept it, and move on, you'd rather just die. Which, to be fair, it's a free country, and it's no skin off my nose, but I'm pretty sure it would break Jim's heart. So for his sake, not to mention your family, of whom I am quite fond, might I humbly suggest that you suck it up, go to India with Jim, and get that mind healing you need."

"I don't need mind healing!" Ron exclaimed. Then, Madam Pince shushed him loudly from across the room, and Ron looked around the Library fearfully to see who had heard his outburst.

"Bullshit. That's pride talking, Weasley. And Gryffindor pride isn't nearly as attractive as Gryffindor courage. Yeah, you were victimized by an evil possessed diary for months. And I was locked in a cupboard for ten years and intermittently starved and beaten. Life is hard. Suck it up and deal."

Harry rose from the table as Ron stared at him slack-jawed in a mixture of shock and anger. "I mean seriously. Are you a Gryffindor or not?"

And with that, Harry left the furious boy behind and headed for the door. A perturbed Neville was waiting for him.

"That wasn't *quite* the interaction I was hoping for, Harry," he said somewhat crossly.

Harry shrugged. "Sometimes it's honey. Sometimes it's vinegar. Let's see how it goes."

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**5 June 1993**  
**Outside the Great Hall**  
**8:30 a.m.**

The next morning, Harry was flummoxed when his brother Jim strode boldly up to him before breakfast and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Thank you!" Jim exclaimed. "I don't know what you said to Ron yesterday, but he's coming to India with me. Thank you! I don't know how I can repay you for this."

"For starters," Harry said through gritted teeth, "Never. Hug me. In public. Again."

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***17 June 1993***

***The Bloody Stump***

***(a small tavern in the magical community of Stebuklinga, Lithuania)***

Peter Pettigrew sat at the bar and shook his head as he read the gossip page from the Daily Prophet. Apparently, James Potter had given his son permission to go halfway round the world on some foolish quest to learn more about Parseltongue. Peter had assumed that James's pathological fear of everything Slytherin would have made him refuse to even acknowledge that Jim was a Parselmouth, let alone get him instruction for it. The solicitor was quite pleased this outcome, as he was eager to see Jim develop a gift that tied him so closely with the Dark Lord.

He was also strangely relieved. After everything that had happened, he was still rather fond of James Potter for sentimentality's sake, but the man's rejection of Jim over the Parseltongue matter had become troubling, almost to the point of demanding action. It would have been regrettable if Peter had been forced to execute Contingency Plan G ("Codename: Little Orphan Boy") at this point, even

if it would have greatly strengthened his influence over the Boy-Who-Lived.

As he continued reading the society news ("*House of Greengrass Elevated to Ancient and Noble Status*," he read silently. "*Heh. I bet the Selwyns are having a cow!*"), Peter delicately sniffed at the air, and then his nose twitched. He turned around on his barstool and was not particularly surprised to see two strapping Eastern European lads standing over him trying to be intimidating. Granted, a pair of partially transformed werewolves would have been intimidating to most people, but Peter Pettigrew had conquered that fear long ago. Nowadays, their dominance games were just amusing to him, like puppies growling at larger predators, ignorant of the scope of their power disparity and slightly adorable for it.

"You're not from round here," one of them said in a thick Lithuanian accent.

"Why no, my good man," Pettigrew said with exaggerated cheer. "I'm actually from Lincolnshire. Upper Appleby to be precise. Have you ever been to Lincolnshire? It's quite nice this time of year."

"You should buy us a round of drinks," the other werewolf said menacingly. "In fact, why don't you skip the middleman and give us all your galleons so we can buy drinks ourselves."

"Oh, I don't think so, my friend. I'm saving my coin to buy a round *for your alpha*. Is he around perchance?"

Both werewolves stiffened and looked at one another. "Who are you?" said the first one. "What do you want with him?"

"Oh, we're old friends. He and I go *waaaay* back, we do. Yessiree bob! Way, way back!" Then, Pettigrew snickered as if there had been a private joke in his words.

The one on the left snarled and grabbed Peter by the lapel of his jacket, practically jerking him off his barstool. Peter's smile faded, and he looked down at the werewolf's clawed hand and then back up at his attacker.

"Do you mind," he drawled in a bored voice. "You're wrinkling my suit."

The werewolf pulled Peter in close enough for him to smell the creature's fetid breath. "I don't like you," he snarled.

Peter snorted. "Well, get ready then. You're about to like me even less."

Then, with a blur of motion, the wizard lashed out with his right hand, raking his fingernails across the werewolf's cheek. The werewolf let out a hiss of pain and staggered back, letting Peter go in the process. The other one started forward angrily, but Peter held up both hands to show that his fingernails were now two-inches-long and razor sharp, though they were an oddly disturbing shade of pink instead of the black talons the partially-transformed werewolves bore. The second werewolf paused and then turned to his bleeding friend, who was now unsteady on his feet and seemed dazed and delirious.

"Janos! What's wrong?!"

"Stav...ros. Feel diz...zy."

Janos pulled his hand away from his bleeding face, and Stavros gasped in shock. The whole side of Janos's face around the four claw marks on his cheek were now covered

with tiny white pustules. Janos's legs gave out and he fell to the floor.

"Janos!" The other werewolf snarled and turned towards Peter as if to attack.

"STAVROS!" came a loud guttural voice from across the room. The pack's alpha had arrived. "Stand down."

"But..." A low growl from the alpha caused Janos to shut his mouth. The alpha stalked over to the fallen werewolf.

"What did you do to him, Pettigrew?"

"A magical form of bubonic plague. Non-contagious but even deadlier than the original." Peter carefully walked around the fallen werewolf. "Did you know that the Muggles called bubonic plague *the Black Death*? It killed off half of Europe in the Middle Ages. It came here from the Far East."

He gave a toothy grin. "They say *the rats* brought it. Which is not entirely accurate, but sometimes myths are more important than truth where magic is concerned."

The alpha snorted contemptuously. "Will he die?"

Peter shrugged. "Probably not if you get him to a healer quickly. It's quite lethal to Muggles and wizards alike, but you lot are hardier than most. Perhaps if he's lucky he'll survive but gain a valuable life lesson from the experience."

The alpha sighed. "Take him, Stavros. Get him to a healer."

Without looking at Pettigrew, Stavros pulled the delirious Janos up off the floor and carried him from the room.

"What do you want, Pettigrew?"



"Your presence is needed in Britain, my old friend. I have a job for you."

"I haven't set foot on British soil since 1981. You know that."

Peter smiled. "You haven't had the right incentive. I'm here to provide it. I have need of services that only *Fenrir Greyback*, the most dangerous and feared werewolf in Europe, can provide."

He took a step towards the menacing figure completely without fear.

"What services?" Fenrir asked. "And what incentives?"

"Several services that call for your ... *delicate touch*. And as for incentives, well, how would you like to kill the son of James Potter? Or failing that, bring him into the pack like you tried to do with Remus Lupin?"

Fenrir smiled. He was always in favor of watching his pack grow.

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### ***19 June 1993***

### ***Hogwarts Castle***

It was the end of term, and the exam results had shuffled the class rankings a bit. While Hermione was still in first place overall among the Second Years, Neville had topped her in Herbology, and Lavender had beaten her by the tiniest margin in Potions. Hermione took it in good humor and promised Lavender that she was going to study hard over the summer, just as Lavender had said to her the previous June. Harry and Hermione were both furious (as were quite a few other students) that, in light of Lockhart being evil, insane, and probably a Death Eater, his class

would be treated as pass/fail with no actual grades given, which meant that neither of them would have the bragging rights of being first in the class despite being the only students who served on multiple research teams.

As the students were boarding the carriages for the ride to the train station, most of the teachers stood out on the front steps of the castle to wave goodbye, the Headmaster among them. Filch stood silently beside him with Mrs. Norris in his arms. As the carriages pulled out, the teachers headed back inside, but Filch stepped in front of Dumbledore and held out an envelope for him. After giving the Caretaker a quizzical look, Dumbledore tore it open and read the contents.

***Dumbledore,  
I quit.  
signed Filch***

Surprised, Dumbledore looked back towards the (former) Caretaker who was headed towards the castle.

"Mr. Filch," he called out. "Argus! What is the meaning of this?"

Filch turned back and studied the Headmaster with a look of contempt. "It means I'm done. I'm taking Mrs. Norris away from here. You can find some other sucker to clean up after these little monsters and make sure they don't all impregnate one another in the broom closets. I'm out!"

"But Argus! Where will you go?!"

"Hogsmeade. Aberforth hired me to tend bar and keep the place clean. I'm looking forward to it. I'd much rather clean up after drunken reprobates than a school full of snot-nosed brats."

And with that, Argus Filch stormed off, leaving an astonished Dumbledore behind him.

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Just before stepping into the carriage, Harry paused and looked back towards the castle. For just a second, he had the odd feeling that he was being watched. Then, he shrugged and climbed up to join his friends, pausing just long enough to pat the thestral pulling the carriage on its flank.

Up at the top of the Astronomy Tower, two Hogwarts ghosts stood together watching as the students departed. The Fat Friar was a jovial rotund man who hardly looked the part of a ghost at all save for the fact of his translucency. The Bloody Baron, on the other hand, fit the appearance of the Restless Dead to a T with his jangling chains (though they made no sound at all unless he wished them to be heard) and the bloody wounds which covered his immaterial form. If the Friar had any apprehension about standing so close to Hogwarts most frightening ghost, he didn't show it in the slightest.

"When will you talk with him, old friend?" said the Friar as he took another drag from the mead-cup that never emptied yet never truly quenched his thirst. "I know you've been avoiding Potter almost entirely since his Sorting."

"I will meet with him when he is Prince and not before," said the Baron in his cold rasping voice. "That was Salazar's command, and I shall obey for as long as his House endures."

"Hmm. I had wondered if you might be... *accelerating* things a bit with this case. I don't recall

you ever sending a prospect his questing letter as early as First Year."

"You pay too much attention to matters that do not concern your house, Friar," the Baron said dangerously.

"Yes," the Friar replied with a smirk. "That's one of the things my House is known for."

The Bloody Baron sighed loudly, remembering as he did that he had not need for breath and so the sigh was but an affectation. The Fat Friar was one of the few beings in Hogwarts who could annoy him. Perversely, that was also why he enjoyed the other ghost's company. Besides, of the other House ghosts, Nicholas was a ridiculous fop, and Helena was ... Helena. So who else would he talk to about matters not fit for the ears of either the Quick or the other Dead?

"Time grows short, Friar. Something is *moving* out there in the Wild. You know that as well as I. We who are Dead cannot yet see the shape of it, but we know that it is there, even if the Old Laws bar us from sharing freely what we do know with the Quick. Only a strong Prince can purge Slytherin House of the rot at its core, and only when Slytherin House is purified can all four Houses stand together to meet that which draws nigh."

"And you think Harry Potter's the one? Forgive me, Baron, but your track record of selecting Princes over the last hundred years is not the best."

The Bloody Baron turned back to watch the carriages as they pulled away.

"You are wrong. His three predecessors were each worthy Princes in their own fashion, but each in turn strayed from

the path. Regulus was betrayed by his family. Lucius by his pride and greed. And Tom, ironically, by love. Harry Potter has many trials to overcome, but I believe that in time he will sit upon the Throne as Prince and, I hope, fare better than those who came before him."

The Fat Friar sniffed. "Honestly, I've never even understood the point of having a Prince of Slytherin. None of the other Houses need anything like that."

"Do not play the fool, monk. You above all others know perfectly well why a Prince of Slytherin is needed, even if Hufflepuff geniality forbids you from saying it aloud. The great virtue of Hufflepuff is Loyalty, while its great vice is Passivity, a refusal to act when doing so risks those you care about. The great virtues of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw are Courage and Reason, but they share the vice of Arrogance, the belief that either courage or reason is all that matters. But in Slytherin, our virtue is Ambition, and our vice ... is *also* Ambition. Alone among the Houses of Hogwarts are we the ones most likely to be brought to ruin by our greatest strength. *That* is why a Prince is needed. Someone with the power and intellect and resourcefulness to rule the House, but also with the wisdom and cunning to do so only from the shadows and only for the greater good of both the House and the wizarding world at the expense of his own prestige."

He turned back to the Friar and looked down upon him imperiously. "I would think that the humility demanded by the role would appeal to a Hufflepuff."

The Friar laughed mirthfully at that and raised his tankard in salute. "Well then, here's to Harry Potter! May he find just enough Hufflepuff inside himself to do the job right!"

The Bloody Baron growled, but the Friar could tell that there was the tiniest twitch at the corner of the old ghost's lips.

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As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station, Harry's compartment was full of all his closest friends: Neville, Theo, Hermione, Blaise, Ginny, and Luna. The group had been discussing their various plans for the summer.

By a happy coincidence, Hermione and Blaise would both be in Tuscany for three weeks, and so the Countess Zabini had invited the Grangers to stay at her villa there. What the two did not share was that there was no coincidence - Blaise had arranged for Hermione to meet with his old Occlumency tutor to get some specialized training while her parents were taking in the sights of Old Italy.

Ginny would be spending the summer trying to break the news to Molly that she would be trying out for Draco's spot as Seeker in the fall, which meant that she would need practice time on a broom and preferably not in the middle of the night while everyone else was asleep.

Harry and Neville would start summer tutoring almost immediately after getting back to Longbottom Manor. They didn't know who with yet, but Augusta had written to Neville to inform him that she'd found "*someone who she thought could fill young Nymphadora's shoes quite admirably.*" The two were cautiously optimistic but also slightly worried.

Theo was the most relaxed of the group. He expected to spend the summer tooling around Malfoy Manor again, learning from Lucius whatever the man felt like teaching.

Apparently, fencing was on the agenda for the summer, which Theo was quite excited about.

Luna would be working with her father at the Quibbler, which seemed less exciting than what her friends had planned, but she nevertheless seemed excited about it.

"Oh, by the way, Harry Potter," she said with her dreamy expression. "Thank you for doing that thing you did to Ronald. He seems much happier now, and his nargles aren't quite so blue and listless."

Harry made a face at the girl while everyone else looked back and forth between the two in confusion.

"Um, what?" said Blaise in confusion.

"Blue and listless nargles mean severe depression," said Hermione authoritatively, "which described Ron rather well. Apparently, he's doing better. Which simply leaves the question of what exactly Harry had to do with it."

"I just gave Ron some advice," Harry said casually. "I've no idea what Luna's talking about. No idea at all." He favored Luna with a genial smile which she returned.

"Okay, no offense, Luna," said Theo, "but I'm not getting into *nargles* on the ride home. It'll just give me a headache." He turned to Harry. "I am curious about one thing, Harry. Draco mentioned that Malfoy Manor was down to just two house elves. His mum took one when she left, but apparently, Lucius *sold* you the other one. What's that all about?"

"It was Dobby. He was the one who warned me last summer that someone was trying to kill me. And he later tried to save my life, albeit in the most roundabout, borderline

insane way I could imagine. Malfoy didn't want a house elf of questionable loyalty, so he gave me the option to buy Dobby off of him for a nominal sum. The alternative was to kill him."

"That's horrible!" Ginny exclaimed. Harry just shrugged.

"I'm not entirely sure he'd have actually done it. I think in hindsight it was just an ethics test for me. I failed ... or passed, maybe. Honestly, I'm still not sure which."

"Well, since the topic's been raised," Hermione said, "can someone please explain to me exactly what house elves are? Preferably in a way that reassures me that the wizarding world doesn't tolerate slavery in 1993?"

"Well, to be honest," said Blaise, "we kinda do. It's just the slaves in question actively want to be slaves, get offended if not allowed to act as slaves, and will actually die if freed from slavery."

Hermione looked horrified. "So they're, what, symbiotes? They need to bond with wizards to survive?"

"Actually no," said Neville. "They don't need wizards to survive but rather wizard dwellings, places where wizards have lived for a long time. That's why for the most part only rich Purebloods have house elves. They're the only ones with houses that have been around long enough to support the bond. Even a Muggleborn could bond with a house elf if that Muggleborn lives in the right sort of home. Harry could bond with Dobby because he lives at Longbottom Manor and has an inheritance interest in Potter Manor, even though he's technically a guest with us and won't own his own ancestral seat for years to come. There are a few businesses that have house elves because they used to be manor homes before being converted into stores or



factories. Quality Quidditch Supplies has house elves because their factory is in what used to be the old Gamp Castle before the Gamp's all died out."

"Are there any laws that protect them being abused?" Hermione asked.

"Not many," Neville admitted. "It is, however, very socially offensive to get caught abusing house elves in any way. It's considered a sign of insanity, actually, to abuse house elves because you're hurting something that by its very nature can never hurt you back so long as it stays in your employ."

"We've never had any house elves," Ginny said. "The Burrow's not nearly old enough to attract or support one, so I don't know much about them. Does anyone even know where they came from?"

"Oh, the usual answer," Blaise said. "A wizard did it. What's known is that house elves have been around for centuries if not millennia. We know they had house elves in Roman times for sure. My own pet theory is that some wizard thousands of years ago tried to enchant his home so that it would make his bed and cook his breakfast and mop its own floors and generally just look after itself without him needing to do anything, but he screwed up and accidentally created a sentient species obsessed with housekeeping. We can argue all day about the ethics of whether house elves *should have been* created, but the fact remains that they *were* created, and our options today are either set them free and risk genocide or keep using them as servants but try to make sure they aren't mistreated."

"Honestly," said Harry. "I think sometimes that 90% of the problems we have today all stem from stupid wizards from

thousands of years ago who didn't give the tiniest thought to the future." Several of his friends agreed.

"Well," said Theo, "all I know is that I'm glad Mrs. Malfoy - or Madam Black now, I guess - took Mogli with her when she left. That was one *creeeeeepy* elf, and with a little luck, we'll never encounter it again."

And with those words, Theo Nott challenged the gods of irony.

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Even as Theo mentioned Mogli's name, the vicious little elf was perched on top of the roof of the Hogwarts Express engine car. About a mile ahead, the train would soon be passing over a bridge across a deep chasm. The bridge was strong but not strong enough to defy house elf magic. With a single snap of his fingers, Mogli would cause the train to jump the tracks and dive into the ravine below. Many of the children of Hogwarts would die in the disaster. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy would *definitely* die in the disaster. Mogli would ensure it as Mistress had commanded.

Then, Mogli stiffened and turned around. Behind him on the small roof was *Dobby*, the treacherous little elf who had shielded the Potter brat from Narcissa Black's wrath all year long. Mogli had treasured his time spent torturing his fellow house elf for the Mistress's amusement in years past, but play time was past. It was time for Dobby to pay for his interference.

"Mogli shall not harm Harry Potter," Dobby said in a tremulous but determined voice.

Mogli sneered hatefully. "Dobby cannot not *stop* Mogli from harming Harry Potter."

The two house elves stood perfectly still and stared deep into one another's eyes.

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## **Meanwhile...**

Nine layers removed from Reality, a small pocket universe suddenly came into existence. It was quite small as universes go - no bigger than fifty light years across - but it was far enough removed from Reality that the two Lares could freely act without causing any disturbances to the Material World.

A good house elf leaves no sign of his passage.

Instantly after the battle space's formation, Lar Dobby and Lar Mogli transitioned into the tiny universe already at each other's metaphysical throats. Lar Dobby manifested as a titanic golden figure with two pairs of flaming wings, each spanning a thousand miles and covered with a sea of blinking eyes that were each the size of a small city. His body was humanoid, though his hands and feet were the talons of an enormous raptor, and his head morphed constantly between the shape of a man, an ox, a lion, and an eagle.

Lar Mogli manifested as an enormous cloud several thousand miles in diameter and comprised entirely of a seemingly infinite number of flesh-eating scarab beetles. The scarabs were of a now-extinct species once used in the funerary practices of Lost Kemet until it was undone by the Wild long before the first pharaohs came to rule, and their symbology spoke of Mogli's desire to bring death in the service of his Mistress's nihilism.

The great beetle storm lashed out at the winged figure, but Lar Dobby quickly wrapped his wings around his colossal

mass to shield against the attack. He retaliated by unleashing a gamma ray burst that would have exterminated all life within this pocket universe had it been inhabited by anyone other than the two Lares.

Lar Mogli screamed in pain and anger, his voice echoing down the dimensional corridor so loudly that it would have caused permanent insanity to much of the human race had the two fought no more than three layers removed from Reality. In a fury, Lar Mogli willed the scarabs which comprised part of his vast bulk to solidify into an arm which ripped through a nearby gas giant, yanking out its hyperdense metallic hydrogen core and hurling it at Lar Dobby at nearly 10% of the speed of light.

The impact caught Lar Dobby by surprise, knocking him back and into the gravitational well of the blue supergiant at the center of this solar system. As Lar Dobby sought to reorient himself, Lar Mogli pressed his advantage by reconfiguring the shape of his scarab cluster into the Qliphothic symbol of Azariel the Binder. In response to the Kabbalistic attack, the supergiant instantly cooled while its gravitational field vastly increased, thus transforming the star into a hungry black hole which now threatened to consume Lar Dobby entirely.

But in this, Lar Mogli miscalculated, for just as Lar Dobby was about to cross the Event Horizon, he closed all of his thousand eyes in concentration and instantly calculated the value of *pi* to its last decimal point. As that was *completely impossible*, the calculation had the effect of destabilizing the laws of physics in Lar Dobby's vicinity, thereby inverting the emerging singularity. Matter became energy. Implosion became explosion. And the black hole became a supernova whose raging force annihilated the

exterior of Lar Mogli's scarab storm manifestation and exposed his core.

Then, it was Lar Dobby's turn to press his advantage. He abandoned his cherubic form and assumed a three-layered manifestation. Simultaneously, he was a burning light of pure Justice that shot like a spear into Lar Mogli's core, an epic poem set to triumphant music that recounted the stirring tale of Lar Dobby's victory over his enemy, and a six-word mantra that struck at the fundamental essence of Lar Mogli's existence. This last aspect was the most devastating: six simple words repeated on an infinite loop which overwrote Lar Mogli's existence at every level of his being.

***You shall not harm Harry Potter.***

---

*The two house elves stood perfectly still and stared deep into one another's eyes.*

Then, after barely a second had passed, Mogli swayed and his knees buckled. The murderous house elf started to fall, but it was nothing but a pile of old dead leaves and broken twigs that hit the roof of the engine car before blowing away in the wind. Dobby crossed his arms and smiled in satisfaction before snapping his fingers and disappearing in a loud pop. He was glad to be done with Mogli so that now he could return to the more important job of getting young Master Harry's rooms at Longbottom Manor ready for his arrival, something the house elf thought was vastly more important and more interesting than striving against Mogli's foolishness.

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## **Kings Cross Station**

### **6:00 p.m.**

As the students disembarked, Harry and Neville quickly found Lady Augusta. Neville gave the woman a hug while Harry bowed respectfully. They were both surprised to see Alastor Moody by her side.

"Auror Moody," said Harry. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Just Moody, lad," the older man replied. "I'm retired now from the Auror Corps."

"But luckily for you two, he won't be sitting around gardening or anything like that," said Augusta. "Alastor has agreed to serve as your tutor for the summer."

With that news, just as before, Harry and Neville were simultaneously excited and terrified. Once the introductions were over, the two boys said their final goodbyes to all their friends who each made their way off the Platform. The last two to say goodbye were Theo and Draco who came over just as Lucius showed up to take them home. To Harry's surprise, Lucius actually walked over to Augusta Longbottom and gave a deep and respectful bow.

"Lord Malfoy," she said coolly.

"My lady," he said. "Forgive my imposition and forwardness. But in light of our recent political alliance regarding the Greengrass ascension, to say nothing of my own change of circumstances, I had wondered if we might be able to find even more common ground. Would you do me the courtesy of allowing me to call on you at Longbottom Manor on a date of your choosing?"

Augusta gave the brother-in-law of the couple who shattered her family to pieces a look that suggested a strong desire to hex him into oblivion. But then, she contained her anger. As he'd said, the man had allied with them on a matter of serious importance to the House of Longbottom. And if the rumors of his divorce were true, he wouldn't actually be the brother-in-law of the Lestranges any longer.

"Owl me next week, Lord Malfoy," she finally said. "We can discuss a further dialogue about possible areas of agreement."

"You honor me, Madam. These are interesting times we live in. Change is in the air." He turned to Draco and Theo. "Come along, boys."

Then, he noticed that Theo was staring off into the distance and had gone completely pale. Harry noticed as well, and both he and Lucius turned as one to see what had shocked the boy so. It was a wizard with black and grey hair, a beard, and terrifyingly intense eyes. His clothes were Muggle-style, though anachronistic. They were also as black as the darkest night. Instantly, Lucius became as tense as Theo, and Harry himself tensed in response. His worst fears were confirmed with the next word out of Theo's mouth.

"*Father*," he said in a strangled voice.

"Tiberius," Lucius said calmly. "This is a surprise."

"You know me, Lucius," Lord Tiberius Nott said with a cruel smile. "I'm full of surprises. I couldn't help but overhear what you said just now, and I quite agree. *Change* is in the air. With that in mind, I have elected to change my mind about my son residing with you at Malfoy Manor this summer. I regret not spending more time with my darling

boy who I have not seen face to face since he left home for his First Year. I think it's time I rectified that. To that end, Theodore will be coming home this summer. *With me.*"

"Tiberius," Lucius began, but the other man interrupted instantly.

"*Do* give my regards to your lovely wife when you next see her, Lucius." He actually grinned at that comment. Then, he looked down at Harry. "And *you* must be Harry Potter, the first of your line to be Sorted into Slytherin in untold centuries. And a *Halfblood* to boot! I must confess I've heard a great many *interesting* things about you, young man."

Harry stared up at the former Death Eater. "Likewise," he finally said after a beat.

Lord Nott sniffed softly and then turned towards his younger son. "Come along, Theodore. It's time we were away."

"Theo," Neville began but the boy cut him off.

"Well, that's it until next fall I guess," Theo said suddenly with a frighteningly cheerful voice. "Lord Malfoy, I thank you and Draco for inviting me into your home last summer. Lady Augusta, I thank you for the kindnesses you and your grandson have showed me."

Harry stepped forward but for once was at a loss for what to say. He'd actually studied Lord Nott and tried to use his Legilimency to figure out what to do or say and, to his surprise, felt like he'd hit a brick wall. All of his instincts that had guided him for the last two years now bluntly told him that there was *nothing* he could say to Tiberius Nott



that would free Theo from his clutches for the summer or even guarantee that he would not actively harm the boy.

Now that the initial shock was over, Theo seemed strangely resigned to whatever was going to happen. He pulled Harry into a hug and slapped him on the back. "It's alright," he whispered. "Whatever comes, I'll handle it. And I'll see you in September ... if not before."

With that, Theo released Harry and then walked over to his father, who put a disturbingly firm grip on the boy's shoulder and led him away. Theo gave one last look back at the group and waved with a smile. To Harry, it felt like someone trying to keep his friends' spirits up even as he was being led to the gallows.

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**The Law Office of Peter Pettigrew, Esq.**  
**6:30 p.m.**

Peter strode into his office after hours, exhausted from his International Portkey, and he was surprised to find his secretary Yvette still behind her desk.

"Yvette! Whatever are you doing here this late?" he said.

She glanced towards Pettigrew's conference room. "That wretched old woman is in there," she hissed in a whisper. Peter could tell his secretary was angry, as her French accent grew more pronounced. "Madam Toynbee! That miserable ancient spinster who only ever comes after regular business hours! She strode in as if she owned the place and said she would not leave until you arrived!"

Peter laughed. "I'll speak to her and make sure she never again insists on remaining if I'm not here. You know how our elderly Pureblood clients are, Yvette. They insist on

everything being their way, which is fine because they're willing to pay for it. Now, you finish up and head on home. I won't need you for anything dealing with Madam Toynbee."

"*Merci*, Mr. Pettigrew," she replied, clearly so frazzled that she had actually slipped back into French. She began packing up her things as Peter walked into the conference room, discretely activating its privacy charms as he entered. He was not particularly surprised to find that it contained not an ancient client as Yvette believed, but someone far younger but who had a passion for anonymity.

Narcissa Black-Malfoy. "*Or just Narcissa Black now, I suppose*," he thought to himself.

"I am relieved that the Polyjuice wore off, Narcissa. You are barely tolerable when you are beautiful. It's been a long couple of days, and I don't think I could face your tantrums coming out of the mouth of a nonagenarian. What do you want?"

"I have just learned that Lucius hid the bulk of his fortune from me! I want you to fix it!"

Peter snorted. "Honestly, I'd expected as much. I never thought Lucius would have surrendered that much money so easily if he didn't have more squirrelled away. Where did he hide it?"

"He invested it *with Muggles*!" she said, contempt dripping off the last word.

"Heh. Clever. Obviously, old Abraxus never counted on that. I'm sure it was unimaginable to him that Muggle investments might yield more than wizarding investments. It looks like your screwed then, Narcissa. The marriage

contract says nothing about the profits of investment outside the wizarding world."

"Honestly, Pettigrew! What am I paying you for?!"

He laughed out loud at that. "You're not paying me *at all*, Narcissa. Any legal advice I give you is pro bono since I cannot be seen handling legal affairs for someone with so many Death Eater connections as you, no matter how pristine you've kept your lovely arms. But I sense there's more than money that troubles you. What else brings you here this late in the day?"

She sulked for several seconds. "I have lost Mogli."

"Eh? How do you lose a house elf?"

"I sent Mogli to kill Harry Potter today. He did not return."

Pettigrew grimaced. "I told you to leave that to me!"

"And what have your machinations gotten us. You haven't contributed anything since we had Mogli put Wilkes's train inside your present for your godson."

"As if Mogli's doxy swarm or that ridiculous nonsense with the cursed Bludger did any better. That train would have killed the little brat except for the fortuitous accident of Rufus Scrimgeour literally falling into its path. And even that redounded to our benefit since James Potter is now Scrimgeour's replacement. Already, I've managed to pull strings to send no-bid contracts from the DMLE to people who are sympathetic to our cause, not to mention the blood sample I got from Jim Potter. I think my successes speak for themselves, unlike *your* contributions to our alliance."

Narcissa laughed haughtily and then looked away. Peter thought for a moment and then scowled.

"By the way, how *exactly* was Mogli supposed to kill Harry?" Narcissa continued to avoid eye contact. "*Narcissa!* How. Was Mogli. Supposed to kill Harry."

She sighed loudly as if on the verge of a tantrum. "He was to make the Hogwarts Express jump its tracks and plunge over a cliff."

Peter stared at the Pureblood in shock.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR DERANGED INBRED MIND?!"

"How DARE you?!" she spat back at him.

"Jim Potter was on that train! We need Jim. He's the sworn enemy! His blood must be forcibly taken during an exacting ritual to bring back our Lord not ... not scooped up out of mangled train wreckage *with a sponge!* Are you insane?!"

She jumped up out of her chair.

"I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO IN SUCH A MANNER! I AM NARCISSA BLACK OF THE ANCIENT AND NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK!"

"I KNOW!" Peter yelled back. He also jumped up and stood to yell directly in the woman's face. "I know ALL ABOUT the Ancient and Noble House of Black, Cissy! You only remind me every single time you come here!"

Then, he let out a mean snicker. "Even though between the prison inmates, the disinherited, and the dead, you're really the only bit of Black left. How's *that* working out for you?"

"Damn you, Pettigrew!" She slapped the solicitor across the face, but he just turned back to grin at her with preternaturally sharp teeth.

"My place in Hell has been reserved for a long time, I think." He walked slowly around Narcissa, staying within her personal space the whole time, intentionally crowding her.

"But that's the thing, isn't it, Cissy?" He grabbed her and pulled her in close. "I *know* all about your precious lineage. And *you* know all about *mine*!"

He leaned in to sniff her perfume, softly nuzzling some of her hair out of place as he did. She sneered at him contemptuously.

"You disgust me, Pettigrew," she said in a low angry voice.

He chuckled once more as he leaned in again. "Yes," he whispered softly. "I do, don't I."

There was but a second of hesitation before animal passion trumped the witch's feelings of superiority, and then she threw herself into the man's arms and kissed him almost hatefully. After a few seconds of that, they broke apart just long enough for Peter to whirl around and cast his strongest locking charm on the conference room door while Narcissa reached down with her arm and swept everything that had been sitting on the conference table off onto the floor.

Out in the main office, Yvette had just finished packing up her things and was heading towards the door when she took one last look at the conference room door.

"Poor Mr. Pettigrew," she thought sadly. "He'll probably be stuck in there all night."

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***Longbottom Manor***  
***7:00 p.m.***

Neville Longbottom was as upset as Harry had ever seen him. Immediately after arriving at Longbottom Manor, Augusta had left the boys alone in the sitting room while she went to Floo call her own solicitors to see if anything could be done for Theo. Meanwhile, the boy who had been known across the school for his nearly unflappable calm was now nearly on the verge of tears. Harry wasn't even sure how to respond. He was unused to such emotionalism since he now only felt strong emotion when he chose to.

"Neville, it will be alright," he said. "We'll get him out of there ... somehow."

"But how long will that take?! One of our best friends has been sent off to live with a homicidal sadist and there's nothing we can do about it except *hope for the best*."

The boy sat down in one of the parlor chairs and put his head in his hands. "Honestly, I can't imagine how things could get any worse."

Harry winced at that. For a long time, he'd mocked Blaise Zabini for his superstitious fear of the gods of irony who would strike down foolish people who dared invoke ancient curse phrases such as "*I don't know how things could get worse*" or "*what could possibly go wrong*" or "*this'll be the best Christmas Walford has ever had*." But the last year had made Harry something of a believer, and Neville's earnest comment suddenly sent a chill down his back.

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***1 August 1993***

***From the front page of the Daily Prophet***

***DEATH EATERS ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN!***

***SIRIUS BLACK! BELLATRIX LESTRANGE!***

***THE LESTRANGE BROTHERS! AUGUSTUS***

***ROOKWOOD!***

***YOU-KNOW-WHO'S ENTIRE INNER CIRCLE!***

***WHO WILL SAVE US FROM THE DEATH EATER***

***MENACE?***

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**To be continued in**

**HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATH EATER MENACE**

**Commencing 1 September 2016**

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay, but I hope the length makes up for it. Thanks to all my wonderful followers and reviewers! There will be some light posting between now and September 1. Extremely tentative titles may include the following (in no particular order, and not all may be used):

Theodore Nott and the House of Seven Gargoyles

Ron Weasley and the Secret of the Naga

Jim Potter and the Beast of Shamballa

Ginny Weasley and the Curse of Sutekh

Hermione Granger and the Revenge of the Black Hand

AN 1: Draco Malfoy is going to Durmstrang because in canon he does nothing of any importance in Year 3 except petulantly try to get Buckbeak killed, and I ain't a-wasting time on that stupid subplot. Also, I have too

many characters and he'd have just ended up standing around making sarcastic comments, and I already have Blaise for that. Drake Malfoy will return in Year 4 as part of the Durmstrang contingent, though I'll tell you now that Victor will still be the Durmstrang champion.

AN 2: "Mind you," Neville said. "If you ever use this power to influence me into doing something I shouldn't, Gran will beat you to death with a paper napkin." Theo perked up. "Can you beat someone to death with a paper napkin?" Harry smirked. "If I know Augusta Longbottom, she ll have fun trying," he said.

All that was cribbed from "Oh God, Not Again" by the marvelous Sarah1281, one of my favorite HP fics of all time, though in the original version it was Crack-Harry threatening a bemused Lockhart. It s a marvelous parody crack-fic but please don't let that deter you. It's one of my favorite things on the Internet.



Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!